# Ingrid Rimland

# Lebensraum!

## A Passion for Land and Peace

Book 1

Ingrid Rimland was a child during World War II, born to Mennonite wheat farmers in the Ukraine who had been persecuted in the Soviet Union for their pacifist beliefs. The end of World War II saw her and her family undertake a 1000 mile trek back to the homeland of their forefathers, Germany, now a war-devastated wasteland.

From there, still a youngster, she moved with her family and friends to the rain forests of Paraguay to pioneer the jungle and live, as her grandmother put it, " . . . far from the wicked world."

Since the early days of her youth, Ingrid Rimland has come vast intellectual distances. She first made a name for herself with her award-winning novel, The Wanderers, (Concordia Publishing House, 1977, Bantam Books, 1978) that depicted the German soldiers not as conquerors but as liberators and heroes in the eyes of an ethnically savagely besieged community, about to be annihilated in one of Stalin's "ethnic cleansing" operations.

In 1984, Arena Press published Furies, a powerful autobiography describing her search for freedom from intellectual oppression. She also started writing columns, articles and book reviews for dozens of papers and magazines in America and won a number of journalistic prizes and honors.

In the age of the revolutionary Internet, Ingrid Rimland dramatically wrote herself into the annals of the Freedom of Speech struggle when she defended the world-famous Revisionist Zundelsite, a website she created and administered, against a furious onslaught of powerful private and government censorship forces arraigned against her website to prevent the world from discovering a part of World War II history hitherto never exposed to an unsuspecting, misled public.

In the first two months of 1996, 1300 websites went dark in Germany in a futile attempt by German authorities to prevent German students from accessing the American-based Zundelsite - an Internet "First".

In response to that challenge, "Zundelsite mirrors" shot up spontaneously at major universities all over the globe, as young "cyber fighters" helped to defy the censors - another "First".

In August of the same year, eight historical documents on the Zundelsite were indexed - that is, forbidden - by the German government, on grounds that their historical contents were "disorienting to minors".

In the busiest week of Christmas 1996, nearly 30 million anonymous e-mail letters were slammed into the Zundelsite server system from unknown origins in Canada in an attempt to terrorize the server owner into denying the Zundelsite a place in cyberspace. Canadian and American police have never found the Internet terrorists.

Even as this book goes to print, powerful special interests manipulating the government of Canada are attempting to shut down the Zundelsite through its misnamed "Human Rights Commission" by a desperate and bizarre act - mislabeling the Internet to be a "telephone"!

Lebensraum! - a three part historical novel - is Ingrid Rimland's latest contribution to the intellectual discipline called "Revisionism" - an intellectual movement that insists that history does not belong to the manipulators behind the fratricidal wars of our century but should be freely accessible to all freedom-loving people.

**URL: http://www.zundelsite.com**
**URL: http://www.webcom.com/ina**
**E-Mail: irimland@cts.com**
**Cover photograph: Barry Evans**
**Cover design: Ernst Zündel**

ISBN 1-896006-01-9
52500>
9 781896 006017

*I dedicate this saga*
*to the maligned heroes*
*and the forgotten victims of*
*several fratricidal wars in our century -*
*men and women, brave beyond belief,*
*who hurled themselves against the forces*
*of the New World Order*

Copyright © 1998 Ingrid A. Rimland

First publication in March of 1998

Samisdat Publishers, Inc.
206 Carlton Street, Toronto,
Ontario, Canada
M5A 2L1

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission from the author, except for the quotation of brief passages in reviews.

Cover illustration by Ernst Zündel

Text set in AGaramond Semibold 12

Written and published in the United States. Printed and bound by KNI Incorporated, Anaheim, California, USA

ISBN 1-896006-01-9

This is Book I of a trilogy. Book II and III are available by writing to:

6965 El Camino Real, # 105-588
La Costa, CA 92009

Fax: 760-929-2268

# Lebensraum!

## A Passion for Land and Peace

A Novel
by
Ingrid Rimland

Book I

*Lebensraum! spans seven generations and 200 years. It is a story told to me a thousand times in many different voices: that there was once a place called "Apanlee" that fell to the Red Terror.*

*A novel is, by definition, fiction against the backdrop of genuine emotions. This novel has been my attempt to grasp and to extract the interplay between opposing ideologies, to find the core of human tragedies that make up cold statistics.*

*The novel's voice belongs to "Erika" who, in this saga, is older than I was when I experienced World War II. She is, however, of the transition generation, as I am. Hers is the ethnic voice in this novel, trying to find the right words to own up to the pride and courage that were the hallmarks of her people.*

*She learns to say: "Our history belongs to us. It won't be written, from now on, by anybody else but us."*

*This family saga was gleaned from the driftwood of history. The people I have tried to show to be of flesh and blood came of a tightly knit community of Russian-German ancestry.*

*Ingrid Rimland*

# Prologue

The year is 1989. It's been two hundred years since our Russian-German ancestors first pioneered the steppe, five decades since the war began that Erika experienced as a child. The sky is smooth. A few white clouds slide by; next to me sits a wooden stranger; below sprawls Wichita; and not an hour's drive from Wichita lies Mennotown, where I am heading now. I nibble on a cracker like a squirrel. In Malibu, near Hollywood, that's where you find the thinnest people in the world.

I think: "In yet another hour, I will be hiding all my thoughts."

No matter how much time goes by, it happens every time. To face my relatives takes effort. No matter what my upper hand, I still seek their esteem.

For many years, my relatives and I lived on two different planets, between us, lumbering with righteous wrath, their Elder, Archibald. One day I wrote to them. I even sent a picture.

"A movie star! Almost!" cried Josephine, an unrepentant motion picture buff, still awed by Hollywood.

A movie star? Not quite. To tell the truth, not even close to where I really live. Nobody knows. At times, not even I am

sure. Bygones are buried deep.

Now there is *Left and Right.* It changed the Midwest landscape. When it hit all the screens, my good friend Josephine, had she been still alive, would have rushed down to see it, and afterwards she would have surely said: "Oh, I cried, I cried. It was lovely."

I am so proud of Mennotown that I can hardly stand it, although it isn't often that I admit to that. Its stars keep on sparkling like jewels. Every carrot is grown and consumed on the spot. My folks rise early and plow deep. They are like that—their feet deep in their furrows. They know the earth must breathe.

And yet, how often have they let their enemies choose their own enemies to decimate their kin? Their sense of history is like an unkempt garden.

When I saw Josie last, she was as frail and delicate as a November leaf, one of the oldest citizens of Kansas. But that did not stop her; she still watched every flick—when she was young, she said, they used to call them flickers—with the power to trigger her tears. Through thick and thin this woman stayed herself, which wasn't always easy.

Whenever I would visit—as I would often do in later years when time had mellowed strife—she was in seventh heaven. She would move her old wicker chair into the sunshine on the porch where Lizzy's red geraniums still grew, and settle in with many wrinkled smiles: "Now tell me everything. I want to know the smallest morsel. All of it. All! Precisely." She energized herself by learning details of the world I have created for myself—a world she ached to know but never had the chance to see, for the Depression nullified such plans. *Left and Right* is my tribute to Josie. To her world. To her dreams. To her clan.

To the earth that grew Josie and Jan.

To the kernels that conquered the prairie. To the kernels that brought down The Wall.

One evening, as we were sitting on the porch, just she and I

and in the sky a misty moon, she told me that, once Jan was dead, she was all set to go, leave Mennotown behind, take nothing else but Rarey.

She told me of the auction going forward, only in reverse; she told me all about the time the bankers came and took Jan's farm equipment, took off with combine after combine, and even repossessed the brand new harvesters that Jan had planned to ship to Apanlee but somehow never did—and how his good friend, Doctorjay, the lush, the Lutheran, a man few dared to cross, decided in the end he had it with the bankers and ran them off Jan's property.

All that.

That was before the government succeeded finally in confiscating every gun to safeguard, as they say, democracy, which happened just last year.

Here's what I think, but only to myself: in those days, deep in the Depression, it was acceptable to call a thief a thief. Not now. Now we have laws called Hate Laws. They silence everyone.

There, on the porch that Jan built many years ago for his young, sparkling Josie, this matriarch and I had many cozy chats. On the wall on a bent, rusty nail hung her old, wilted suffragette hat. By then, time had so worn her spine that she could barely straighten it, but early, every morning, she took her walk against the wind.

She was like that. She said she would walk, and she did.

Josie liked to squander all her charms and energies on foreigners. She was known to be partial to them. She either liked people or didn't—and it was clear when we first met that she liked me. A lot. If ever there was such a thing in my turbulent life, she gave me a sense of belonging.

The moment I arrived in Mennotown out of the European war, she rose and stood behind my chair. When no one knew quite what to do with me, she knew; she made me popcorn and hot chocolate milk with marshmallows on top. She even made

me eat *vareniki* which she herself disliked.

She told me with a wink I thought odd at the time: "Eat. Eat. You can't shame me by eating so little. They are good for your teeth and your gums."

"Have yet another zwieback," Josie said, warm hands on both my shoulders. She took a shine to me. She spent herself on other people, gladly, but only those she liked.

She was so old, by then, nobody knew for sure just what her age might be. But she was ancient; that we knew. She did not keep that secret.

"I've lied so long about my age I really can't remember," said Josie, being Josie. "Can I afford to die? I have this bet with Archie I will outlive him yet."

For years, she told me many times, when I myself locked horns with Archie, she'd cross the street when she saw Archibald. He never managed to catch up with her, no matter how much energy and cunning he put to the pursuit.

When I saw Josie last, the paper claimed she was two years away from being mentioned coast-to-coast by Willard Scott of NBC as one of Kansas' most esteemed, noteworthy centenarians. I have been told she died in peace, which may be her last laugh.

We spent many evenings together, examining the past. Those nights were rich. She gave me her entire life to help my script along. She never told one story when two or three would do. The winds took up the sweetness of the soil and spread it everywhere—the smell of the earth, freshly plowed.

"I was a child," she said. "Jan was a grown-up suitor."

I see Jan Neufeld clearly. That's where he came alive, the man who founded Mennotown, who spread the first grain on the floor and beat out the heads with jointed flails. Josie told me many stories of the angular young man who put his seed into his land and sons and daughters in her womb to make the future grow, who drove his sturdy roots into the soil of Mennotown so that America could prosper in the Lord.

And may He rest Jan's bones.

Old Josie told me that, when she arrived from the Ukraine—a child herself, about my age when I arrived out of the rubble of Berlin almost six decades later—she took off her shoes and walked barefoot, so she could feel the warmth of Kansas against the white and frozen wasteland she had left behind.

"And ever since," said Josie, smiling wistfully, "I walked through my life with sand in my shoes. In this town, you behave."

Right. You behave.

There is a script, and you conduct yourself according to that script. If you know what is good for you, you pay attention, verily.

I didn't, in my younger years. I was a hothead then. I would not let them be; there was a lot of friction. But there were also rules, and now I know there would not have been Mennotown, had there not been strict rules.

From Josephine, as she was called reproachfully in her own youth when she broke yet another rule, I learned the details of the early pioneering years—the prairie storms, the buffalo chips, the days when the *Wichita Eagle* was only eight pages and people paid with eggs, as fine a currency as any.

"The year when Jan and I were married," said Josephine, "a haircut cost three pennies. A loaf of bread went from a nickel to a dime."

She came to Kansas as an immigrant from the Ukraine at a time when all travel was still done by surrey. She still remembered clearly when beards went out of fashion but mustaches hung on. She told me of the oxen taking people visiting across the bumpy road to Hillsboro, which was before the flivvers came that calcified the prairie's arteries and forced the yields and stops.

I know all about Jan and his turn-of-the-century flivver. And Little Melly's doilies. And her shenanigans. And how Jan, still engaged to Little Melly, was set to marry her but ended up marrying Josie—who then disgraced herself by having one of the

unsettling Finkelsteins arrive and have her likeness drawn, proud as she was of her first child, still snug in her young belly.

The earth moved through the tail of Halley's Comet the year when Josie wore a flowered hat—a scandalous offense. She was the first who rode a bicycle along the dusty streets of Mennotown and showed a rakish ankle. The first, but not the last.

I know the stories about Doctorjay who always smelled of iodine, and his wife, Noralee, who hid behind the apple tree so she could better eavesdrop, and how, once Noralee had passed away, he married Abigail who was a Donoghue and danced atop his nose.

"You went to him with all your woes," said Josephine, "and he knew everything, despite a third grade education. He was a riot, people said. Politically astute."

I know. He voted Roosevelt.

"He had his instincts in his bones," insisted Josephine as she and I sat on the porch and watched the shadows lengthen. "When finally the war was done and Hitler put a bullet to his brain, old Doctorjay, the town's most patriotic motorist, made his horn shriek before he took the intersection, and that's when he ran into one of Lizzy's cows. Smack! Plunk! That's how he killed himself. And wholly within character."

I listened, and I did not say a word, and in good time Old Josie died, and much was left unsaid.

Two years before she passed away, Josie took my hand and led me to the mothball-smell Historical Museum, built on the corner lot where the two country roads converge—one out of Hillsboro, one out of Wichita—replete with holes and ruts that always made Jan's horse rear up and buck as he came courting Josephine.

"Against his mother's wishes. She never would have told you so, but we all knew: she was against our marriage."

I know that story, too, for Lizzy's spirit never left; it lives on in a hundred quilts she stitched to give away to charity; it lives in jams cooked to perfection and in *vareniki* that are prepared just

so.

"She was all set to have Jan marry Little Melly who wanted him in the worst way," triumphed Old Josephine. And something fired from within. Still. After all these years.

And then, with a small sigh: "Well, life is short. What can you say? Then Little Melly passed on, too. She has been dead for years. God rest her spiteful soul."

She took my hand and showed me Doctorjay's museum, where people long since dead spoke to me many times from dusty documents and rusty tools, their voices quietly intense, embedded in the fabric of this place called Mennotown, so I can tell the younger generation that there are, after all, true absolutes.

That black is black and white is white and that there is no argument.

That thrift is preferable to sloth. That it is better to be diligent than lazy and better to be clean than foul.

Here is a town still stuck in time—old-fashioned people still doing their old-fashioned living behind their checkered gingham drapes, still basking in the joys of patriotic holidays, still rolling out their hospitality, yet sensing dimly that a fiendish and nefarious thing is gnawing at the edges of their heritage with sharp and even teeth.

In *Left and Right,* I said out loud what others were merely thinking. That's why, when it premiered, it packed the movie houses, and even Archie cheered.

Now I put up with Archie, and he puts up with me. We found a truce of sorts. He says I cast spells over people. He claims I have what he calls artistry—one step removed from vanity, which is the sin of sins.

Artistry. That is my job. That is also my passion. I try to write with light, although in Hollywood, belching its moral soot, that isn't always easy.

In Mennotown, by contrast and comparison, there is a place for everything, and everything is order. That is the righteous way. Folkways still have a place in Mennotown, and black is

never white.

When I was young and foolish, I was determined not to let that ruin my life—their narrow, well-scrubbed habits, as tidy as tidy can be, the lapse into Low German, the tormenting snippets of gossip. Impatient as I was in those young years for Hollywood, not knowing then from where my own impatience would catch its fire next, I thought I could leave everything behind. Just up and walk away. Just head for Hollywood, its glitter and its lure.

Now I know this: I could no more have stopped myself from writing *Left and Right* than I could keep a cloud from raining.

I know every Aryan proverb by heart.

Don't look at me like that.

I'm nearly biting off my tongue when I hear one more time the corny story of the Holocaust, which is our daily sop. It's Whitey's victuals. There's no relief—not ever.

When it comes to my past and heritage and owning up to it, I am still raw and shy, and with my best foot forward. But I measure myself by my relatives' standards, and not by Hollywood's. Let that be clearly known.

My relatives are like old songs—songs with the smell of hay. I feel their ethnic tap root stir in me and burrow deep and bring up those forgotten nutrients on which my past was grown. It is my past; it still belongs to me—and Hollywood won't wrestle it from me. For I have forebears, too.

They suffered, and they died.

From their portraits they stare down at me with their ancient, blue, pacifist stares, and I know that as long as I still walk with sand in my shoes, I can't be at peace with myself. I need to walk barefoot, like Josie.

I didn't understand all that until I was much older.

For many years, I stayed away, because these people hurt me, particularly Archibald.

"Once a Hun, always a Hun!" he told me many times when

out of earshot of the clan.

It happens every time as I go back, periodically, right after the harvest is safely garnered and just before the colors fade from the last days of fall, to be engulfed with familiarity, to soak up that old smell.

A Hun? Unspoken is the slur he might have used, but didn't. That was his private verdict, and is his verdict still, but what does that fool know?

The man is blind. He is so blind he has to finger everything. He always fingers me: "—and what about the ovens? And what about the Jews?"

Well? What about the Jews?

That question mushrooms suddenly, without the slightest warning, out of the clear blue sky. It stigmatizes instantly. It hobbles every thought.

"Just what did we do wrong," I ask myself, "except to lose the war?" I think he is a milk-and-water moralist. He suspects I won't make it to heaven. I, on the other hand, have been to hell and back.

I walked through my Fatherland's ashes.

When I left Mennotown to try my luck in Hollywood, I took my old, Ukrainian nanny's name for my good luck charm, to be safe, and I packed Lilo's dream.

To be a writer for the screen was one of several dreams that Lilo and I shared when we were teenagers in war-torn Germany. That is galling to Archie—to hear about Lilo. He does not understand that it was Lilo's life, and Lilo's death, that made me what I am. When it comes to my sources, I will take orders from no one, not even Archibald.

While I still lived in Mennotown, I was never myself; I settled for somebody else. I had to leave, for Archie's prayers would have strangled me—for he had come, I knew, and crushed my much-beloved Fatherland and stonily laid Lilo's brave, young life to ashes. He was the one who took his gun and pointed it at Jonathan long after all the bombing stopped. He helped the fel-

low with the bigger mustache. To his eternal shame.

I, too, will have my reckoning. One day I will return for good, to find that warmth again, that prayer-warmth, deep in that ethnic quilt, bypassing Archibald.

I had no idea I would tap into feelings that strong. When I first started working on my play, I thought that I was a mosquito trying to buzz an elephant. As a producer friend once said: no film in Hollywood can win, unless you break at least five of the Ten Commandments.

Yet *Left and Right* won handsomely, which ought to tell you something. That was no accident.

"Next, I will have to tell them about Erika," I think, but something within shrinks away. It is painful to speak about her. Ever since the world has started calling me by my artistic name, I have forgotten about Erika.

I spent years distancing myself. She's dead now. Tasha lives. She leads a rich and lavish life in Malibu, surrounded by the Jews.

It's still that old, crazed fear.

It's easier to go along with the prevailing attitude, to say with nonchalance: "Yes. Yes. Indeed. There was a devil on the loose in Nazi Germany. He had a tail and hoofs. He was up on the mountain. Me, I was down below."

I need to learn to stand up tall, look Archie straight in his left eye—he lost his right one in an ethnic brawl, way back in World War I because he was a German—and say to him as calmly as I can: "But that's not how it was! You have your facts all wrong!"

That's what I need to say.

I see the trembling cross as it is sliding, slowly, over golden patches. I think: "Way down below, there grows the wheat of Apanlee. Those are the nuggets of which history is made. It's not the Hebrew's gold."

How many of them know? Does anybody care?

There lies the quilt my Russian-German relatives commenced

to stitch with diligence and care when Lizzy landed in the prairie more than a hundred years ago, believing that as long as preachers led the faithful in a hymn, good values couldn't help but triumph over bad. She had her values straight. When she sailed the Atlantic, she brought not just the trunk that held the wheat, she brought her non-stop prayers she uttered in High German, the language of her Lord whom she loved more than life. There were no questions in those days as to identity in ethnic terms; there was firm certainty. It mattered little that her native soil was the Ukraine—her language was the language of the country she called her Fatherland with pride. As she would tell her brood a thousand times: "What if a cat has kittens in the oven? Does that make kittens cookies?"

She was an Aryan woman. Let us remember that. Before she came to Kansas to settle on the soil that would grow bread to feed the world, she packed the following: self-discipline, trustworthiness, thrift, diligence, goodwill, neighborly charity, fidelity and pride. In other words, she packed her bedrock values. She never spent a dollar foolishly. Nobody paid her way. She lived a life with satisfaction guaranteed, and when she died, in the Depression, she knew, and so did the entire state of Kansas, that she had lived correctly.

That needs to be said, too. Her way of life was virginal. She had blue eyes. Blond hair.

There was not one of them who did not have blue eyes. She left her progeny, of whom there are so many now you cannot count them all, and they are blond and blue-eyed.

Their gaze is hooded now, their spirit shackled, sadly.

To this day, they are strong and hardy; they all grew strong on air and hymns and healthy food; and every one of them believes, this in the face of our sappy world, that it is mostly food and singing that sets them still apart.

That's how they've been debased.

That's all it takes, they think—just healthy food and lusty hymns and Faith and proper credit to the Lord. That's why their

children go to church like little wooden dolls, in all their finery, to hear and take to heart what Archie has to say.

Judeo-Christianity starts early and runs deep in Mennotown, where bingo is forbidden and nicknames clues to vanity. That's Archie's turf. He guards it with ferocity. When I give lectures and tell audiences that there was once a place called Apanlee, they stare and have nothing to say.

Few youngsters, growing up in Mennotown, still have a martyr's memory. High German is already barely breathing; Low German, in another generation, will be gone.

"How much do you remember?" one of the youngsters asked me recently. To him, my people's past is ancient—our war reduced to "Auschwitz," our struggle vilified, our soldiers demonized.

How much did I forget?

Three weeks lay, for example, between the death of Lilo, my best friend, and when the Allies finally arrived—but I remember nothing of that stretch of time. Not one small morsel. Nothing. I do remember clearly, though, the day when Archie and his Negro friend arrived in prostrate, bombed-out Germany, both chewing Wrigley's Gum.

I don't remember, either, how I came to America.

I know the bullets had stopped flying; the Allies were bent over Germany, quartering my Fatherland as though it were an animal as vicious as they come—and not the place where Heidi lived her clean, strict, dedicated life, and Lilo rode her bicycle.

I loved Lilo a lot. I loved Heidi. I loved Jonathan, too, although shyly.

All three of them are dead.

There's much I don't remember rightly. There's much I won't forget.

Then came the bitter and humiliating time I still remember clearly—the stupefying postwar years. The Nuremberg Trials. The whispers about Morgenthau. There was no food in Germany, defeated and divided. There was no fuel. There was no pride, no

splendor. Those few of us who had survived—by means we knew not how!—flung our lives against the likes of Archibald like moths into the flame.

You couldn't buy a button or a needle; the shelves were bare; the people starved; for weeks, we ate nothing but mushrooms. That's when my mother curled her toes around her wooden sandals and went to Archibald and said: "Me, too," and Archie sneered: "We don't owe you a living! There's no free ride for you!" and Mimi tossed away the last shred of her dignity and spoke with downcast eyes: "I hope your holidays went well?"

I never understood how she could compromise like that. I never did, but then, I guess, I blotted out a lot.

When I arrived in Mennotown, I curtsied to my relatives in honor of my betters. I soon enough found out: nobody did that here.

"No need to genuflect," said Archibald, while giving me the evil eye. "This is America. We're equal in America."

Says who?

Blood boils between Archie and me. For years, we passed each other on the sidewalk without speaking. For years, I feared and loathed him. Now I no longer fear him.

His God is very old and has a giant ear, like the satellite dish that sits atop three rusty poles with which he listens in on hirelings up on the Hill whom he now either sponsors or subverts with the help of a muddled but stridently militant pulpit.

These days, he does soul-saving electronically. He will not ever win me to his ways, old sinner that I am, with little to repent. He knows that. So do I.

He rubs it in at every opportunity: "We've got to watch you folks. Your goose will soon be cooked. Why do you look at me like that—sort of funny?"

In Mennotown you walk into the thick of it—into the attitude that all the Germans ever did in World War II was turn the Hebrews into cinders. That comes not just from Hollywood; it

flows right from the pulpit. Judeo-Christianity. You can't go wrong if you condemn the Holocaust. It works like a charm, every time.

And yet, I watch Archie with awe. He is setting the churches afire with Faith. He knows how to rally his troops.

"You start with a given," says Archie, who glorifies God while berating the sinners. "And it's this: That it is better to speak truth than lies. That it's better to live clean than dirty."

Precisely.

And what does he offer his folks, I think as the heat floods my face and my stomach knots up and my heart fills with rage, that Heidi's Führer, Lilo's Führer didn't offer his disciples a hundred times over and more? Salvation. Peace. Clean living. Decency.

Self-discipline rather than stupor.

Honesty rather than falsehoods.

Robust harvests in place of sick weeds.

In the name of the Cross, said the Führer. On behalf of a world filled with beauty. On behalf of a world free of filth.

I've heard it said from Jonathan's own lips that if you gazed too deeply in the Führer's eyes, you fainted from his dream.

Why do I tell you this? I have no choice but to be faithful to my nature; that is why. It didn't used to be that way, for Archie crippled me. It's only now that I have come to realize that there is rubble to be cleared away from my own Aryan soul.

It has been many years since I arrived in Mennotown out of the fratricidal war that buried not just flesh but spirit, sitting at Wednesday devotions, fire on my cheeks and cotton in my ears. They claim that I so hated Archibald that I braided my hair counter-clockwise. That I slept in my bed upside down.

When it was clear to Archibald I would not have my soul be fingered, I had to leave, and Archie stayed, and everyone was glad. Maybe old Josie shed a tear or two. She was the only one.

When I left Mennotown, I was in a hurry to get somewhere fast. Five days before my sixteenth birthday, and doubting I could

ever calm myself, I made my thumb point west and hopped onto a pickup truck and ended up in Hollywood. Now I reside in Malibu where I live in a worldly sense, as Archibald would say, and all the younger folks in Mennotown, the ones that lean toward the Methodists and Presbyterians, are very proud of me.

Not so the oldsters, though, for Archie sees to that. At their church rummage sales, they buy each other's doilies and give him every penny. They have their doubts. I am their object of curiosity.

They know me only through the stories that Archie has invented.

He suspects that I dabble in karma. He is eager to broadcast the worst. I've heard of an owl that bites off the paws of a mouse to keep it in its nest, and Archie is like that.

He is free to say what he wants. I am free to deny it, however.

It's very simple, really. It's not historically correct to say it was the Führer who captivated, magnetized and charmed young people by the millions—young people such as Jonathan. Or Mimi. Lilo. Heidi.

For Heidi, it was mostly order. It was large babies with a lot of energy. And peace. And certainty. And pride. For Heidi, it was sweet and virginal. Mysterious. She took the Führer like a lover to her heart because he understood the fabric of her being.

Or take Marleen, the matriarch of Apanlee. The Führer was her savior, the genuine Messiah. Did that make her a criminal? She was one of the steppe's richest women, yet she owned but two dresses—a dress in which to work, and one in which to pray. She always prayed in German, since her Bible was written that way. Her family was slaughtered savagely before the Führer came. The Führer was her god. He was the best her hard and bitter life brought forth; he gave enormous pride to people beaten to the ground.

My mother, Mimi. She as well.

She was one of the first, way back in the Ukraine, to practice

the Führer salute. To this day, Mimi argues for the Führer; she'll argue to the latest hour that it is wrong to say that it was merely plunder. That it was hate. And spite. And wanting superiority.

"The Jews are like a hydra," claims Mimi, when Archie needles her. "One body, many heads." She argues that she hates it how they nose themselves through Wichita. She says Americans are dense and dumb, wilfully arrogant, ruled by collective ignorance. She says they slave for their exploiters without thinking. My mother knows so little of smooth manners.

She claims that as this country aches for a decisive leader not yet beholden to the usurers, still dragging nation after nation into beggary, the people should remember—if you please!—that, way back in the thirties, at least in Germany, the future walked in light.

"The *Führer*'s message is just as relevant today as it was then," says Mimi. "If you ask me—more so, today, than ever. Why did we lose? Because your numbers triumphed over race and reason? Because the Germany we knew and loved was overwhelmed, not overcome? That quantity, not quality, won out?"

I only need to watch the teeming underbelly of America to know that it is so.

"Sure. Sure. The ovens one more time," sneers Archibald.

The war goes on and on. The news reels never stop.

"It has been more than fifty years," claims Mimi, "yet still the Führer's spirit dances across Europe, clad in his fiery robe, igniting brush and shrub."

That's Mimi, who was victimized as well, which is forgotten now. She looks at me, accusingly, and asks:

"Well? Speak your piece. Don't sit there, only listening. Answer me. Speak up. What do you think?"

What do I think? Here's what I think: I think that if salvation ever comes, it has to come with truth. With naked truth inspected with clear eyes.

I know back home, at Apanlee, the Jews and we lived side by side, for centuries. The Jews left us alone, and we left them alone.

We didn't hurt each other. We lived in worlds apart.

But then the Beast sprang from the canyons of New York and started crunching bone. It clawed at our race and swallowed our males, and shortly after I was born, my people had no men.

That, too, must be called genocide.

But then the Führer came. And wondrously, the swastika spelled calm.

And then the trek. The Allied firebombs. The Führer's city, ashes. The voice of Ilya Ehrenburg, the Jewish propagandist, who hectored the Red Army: "Kill! Kill! And kill! No one is innocent. Nobody! Nobody! Neither the living nor yet the unborn."

It was rivers of Aryan blood in the gutters.

What happened to Natasha, for example, is to this day a question mark. She was an Aryan, too—of Russian ancestry. She wasn't even kin. There's no museum squatting in the heart of Washington to mourn for my dear Baba.

So much—so many died. I am one of the last who made it out of Apanlee, and let me tell you, for the record, that there's no guilt in me.

*

I feel the Kansas wind as I am stepping off the plane. The prairie in November lets you breathe. In the Midwest, the seasons write the script; there is a quietness, a stoic gathering about the sharp horizon that shouldn't be confused with calm. A force of nature. Imminent. Preceding an austere but beneficial country rain.

These people hold the fort. They know the year is running out of days. They know about blocking and tackling. They may not know it yet, but all of them perch at the edge of history.

I count on them. They will link arms to cross a stream, their instincts welding them.

The moment Archie spots me at the Baggage Claim, he fixes me with his left eye, steps forward, and turns breezy. "Well,

how's it going, Sputnik? All systems set to go?"

We give each other harmless smiles. We act as if we are the fattest relatives.

"Say cheese and smile," winks Archibald, elbows a few reporters, and snaps himself a Polaroid to send to the *Wichita Eagle.*

I relish this small interlude, amid the flash of cameras, on spindly heels, with naked toes, strobe lights exploding in my face, snarling traffic with my autographs. Since *Left and Right* turned out to be an unexpected winner, the media dogs me everywhere.

Next, Archie winks: "Well, look at you! My, my! As gaudy as an Easter egg. They say you have so many clothes that you can change your outfit every day. You'll have yourself being gossiped about. You know that, don't you, Sputnik?"

Against my will, I say: "I buy my things on sale." My mouth is dry. My heart is pounding. I know what will come next, and sure enough:

"Well, have you found yourself a rich and comfortable bachelor as yet?"

That's Archie—he goes for the jugular swiftly.

"There's four mighty fine fellows in my congregation—" says Archie. "You'd have your pick. You could do worse, you know. If you would only take advice, you'd know—"

"Please, Archie. Not again."

I ache with the effort of unspoken words. I feel that old, familiar numbness coming over me but manage to keep silent, while Archie tends an itch atop his cranium.

"—you'd know that if you joined, you'd have your choice of charities, what with—"

"I said please don't—"

"—what with your famous name. What with your fine connections all over Hollywood, you could—"

"I cannot be what you would call a genuine Christian—" I try to interrupt, and Archie finishes his thought:

"—you could do so much good. You could help carve the Kingdom of our Lord Christ Jesus who gave His life from love

for sinners just like us—"

We both stare ahead, both very solemn and correct, both knowing that time has blurred nothing.

A billboard warns as we leave Wichita: "Don't trash our town." A deep growl is embedded in that sign. Don't trash America!

Towns smell as people do—some clean, and others dirty. Wichita smells like its slaughter yards on Twenty-First and Market, but Mennotown, I know from visits past, smells clean. It's spic-and-span, this Midwest German town, with smells you take in through both nostrils, lustily, while walking through young pine woods, or between well-scrubbed laundry dried in the morning air, or sitting in a coffee house, depending on which way the wind just happens to be blowing.

I like to visit here. Each year, I visit for a week, but one week is enough.

"Were it not for this man who's sitting next to me," I think, "I wouldn't mind staying a bit." For he knows. And I know. And it is this: He talks about the end result, but nobody questions the path.

The path was everything.

Why was it, for example, I'd really like to know, that this old toady's allies all sported and displayed the pentagrams on their gray, furry caps? That's what I want to know. Americans wore white. The Bolsheviks wore red. On tanks. Planes. Uniforms. But it was Satan's logo.

That's why I still go back, to my own roots, to listen to my past, incomprehensible to most, like a forgotten language.

Each year, when I return, I see that the Midwest has changed a little more. Each year it's darker. Grittier. Each year there's more graffiti.

"That is because the Donoghues have intermixed," says Archie angrily, who reads my thoughts, and steps hard on the gas.

The Donoghues are still considered rabble. Their offspring

are as common and as grimy as the streets of Wichita. They still lead their scandalous lives. They have all sorts of rights the Midwest farmers never even knew existed, but they complain of wrongs.

"And where it will end, I cannot begin to imagine," scolds Archie.

"You wonder," I agree.

His brow is furrowed now. The spittle flies. "They keep on having children, some good, some bad, but all of them on welfare. No morals there. No discipline. All having different fathers."

"Some colored, Archibald?"

"You're darn right, Sputnik. Right! Unfortunately, that's part of it. Precisely!" That's still where Archibald, in every other way a Democrat, all for equality and giving every fellow a fair shake, tends his big grudge against the bureaucrats. "The Feds have dough for almost any cause as long as you are intermixed," sneers Archie.

"Is that a fact?"

"They keep pushing entitlement modes. They give unworthy people subsidies and loans so they can multiply like rabbits—"

Right. But if I voice a heresy like that—what with my German accent and with my German past—all of my motives are in question. He sees no parallels. He holds the Scriptures in one hand and shakes his index finger at the social order with the other.

"He can afford to hitch his morals to misogyny," I think. Aloud, I try to say as calmly as I can:

"But if I say, for instance, that keeping one's own ethnic pool as strong and pure as possible is laudable—"

"You can't say things like that!" scolds Archibald. "That's Nazi talk. Not to say racist, Sputnik."

"But didn't you just—?"

"You can't say things like that around here. Just you remember that."

"Why not?"

"This is America. We're equal in America."

Which, he thinks, ends the argument.

Next he says this: "I hear that *Left and Right* is going through the roof?"

"That's what they say," I tell him modestly.

"How many zeroes, Sputnik?"

"You'd be amazed to know."

But Archie only sniffs. "A zero here, a zero there, that is the modern way. You can't grow real wealth based on zeroes. It's like I always tell my kids, you've got to practice stewardship. Just practice proper stewardship—"

The Lord gave Archibald his share of sons and daughters, this after Archie finally threw caution to the wind and married Temperance. Now, for my benefit, he counts his offspring's virtues on his fingers. "I taught my children personally that, by themselves, they all add up to nothing. Life's seasoning is Faith."

I know most all of them—all fine and upright citizens, equal to Satan's challenge. Some have preceded him and rest already in eternity; but most are still alive. The carpets in their homes are inches thick. When that old Kansas wind is blowing, they all wear woolen underwear. One opted for a lucrative career in dentistry. A second is a known environmentalist; a third is anti-nuclear, on account of his pacifist roots. One female teaches Anabaptist history. Still yet another, Norah Leigh—born after Noralee died and just before the geezer, Doctorjay, wed Abigail—works as a postal carrier in Mennotown's main office, a job she held for more than forty years. There was some talk about retirement a few years back, but Nora Leigh convinced the government that would be mental cruelty: her life would be curtailed beyond repair if she no longer knew who got his mail from whom.

A few years back, her oldest son ran for Congress on the Moral Majority ticket, but missed election by an inch.

"He lost," claims Archibald, "because he didn't have sufficient visibility, which was the reason why he turned into a televangelist. He is a real Epp that way. He knows the politi-

cians on the Hill are ripe and ready for the Gospel."

A pious Anabaptist zeal runs deep in straight-line Epp descendants. They do not scatter among Lutherans. Or visit arcades or, for that matter, ice cream parlors. Never! Or roll their socks. Or take up hockey as a sport. Or waste their sentiment on nicknames.

The Epps have multiplied and multiplied again. There are so many Epps, by now, you cannot count them all. A fraction only lives in Mennotown; the rest are in chronic retreat—from the world and its wicked temptations. They farm in Grand Forks, Mountain Lake and Freeman, South Dakota; they carry on in Iowa; they frown with disapproval the moment visitors arrive: a faster pace of singing, up there in Winnipeg! They know they must be ever vigilant to spot the mischief of the Fiend. It's vigilance that sets an Epp apart!

"It took two years and some enormously expensive travel to trace the entire Epp family tree," explains the Epp clan patriarch who's sitting next to me. "Percentage-wise, most of our first names start with M. Not mine, of course. I think that's odd. Don't you?"

"Not really. No."

"I do."

The Epps all keep on shedding spirit pollen, all teaching heathens stealthily and patiently how to let go of gods of stone. One grandchild, Archie tells me proudly, is affiliated with a church that has a growing edge in Africa and Indonesia. Another witnesses in Haiti where gospelling is striking sturdy roots. You find Epps everywhere. Not a few live in Minnesota. Some in Brazil. In Canada. You find them even in the high plateaus of Mexico and in the thorny hell of Paraguay where, odd to say, the hottest season is December, the cold comes from the south in June, the moon hangs upside down; palms dot the land like an army of one-legged soldiers, "—and where, or so some people claim, this sadist doctor that the Jews are always after, this Joseph-what's-his-name, is hiding out among old Nazi brass," says

Archie, giving me a sidelong glance.

"Well, are they making headway?"

"It's up to the authorities," grunts Archibald. "They have their own agenda."

I take care to admire the fence posts. I mention the weather, still mild for this time of the year. I also comment on the ruts in the asphalt.

Not that that stifles Archie, who is like a bloodhound that way.

"I hope they catch him soon. I hope they hang him in Jerusalem. Although I must confess: I've had it now. The Hebrews always think they are the navel of the universe. I've had it up to here."

"No kidding."

"Who do they think they are? They kvetch—they don't stop kvetching! Are they the only ones who have a patent on the Wailing Wall? Is that their copyright?"

There is a lightness in my head and ringing in my ears. That's what I'd like to know.

I stare out of the window. This is some country here. I know the neighbors will cook up some mighty meals to put some meat on me.

We drive through fields and yet more fields—some grain, but mostly stubble. While Archie keeps on staring straight ahead, his neck getting ever more mottled, I watch the tractors, throbbing rhythmically, while several long-haired youngsters sit atop with earphones on, sipping Coke through plastic straws while listening to Randy Travis.

"Those kids just shift the levers leisurely and push assorted buttons; the tractors do the work," brags Archibald, while looking at me sideways.

We drive along in silence. Now that we are alone and he is gathering diplomacy, he doesn't call me Sputnik, and I begin to sense just what is troubling him.

He clears his throat. "Our folks are moving with the times.

We are not that old-fashioned."

"I know."

"The media makes us out that way, but we move with the times."

"Well, who believes the media?"

"Right. Well. Ahem. We have a lot of pride in our machinery. Especially our combines. Those babies cut and thresh up to a thousand bushels of winter wheat per day. You might just want to mention that tomorrow."

"All right."

"Why don't you mention that? How up-to-date we are? How we're moving with the times?"

"Why not? I'll be glad to oblige you that way."

"We aren't as dumb as some people think." His voice has turned defiant. "We're modern folks. We're interfaith. I've checked it out. We've got to think global these days."

"I'm glad you think so, Archie."

"Now that the Berlin Wall has fallen, we know it was our wheat the Russians wanted all along," says Archie, coming at me sideways.

"Last time, that was my argument."

He gives me a suspicious look. "Build that up in your keynote, Sputnik. Be inspirational. Uplifting. Give credit where credit is due. That would please many folks."

"All right."

"Oh, that reminds me. That reminds me. There's this reporter from the *Eagle* who asked if he could do an interview. Now that your movie is a hit, I thought we might discuss a slant—"

"Why not?"

"What will you say?"

"What do you mean, what will I say? I'll answer the reporter's questions."

He inches a bit closer. "The other day, I heard an earful."

"Such as?"

"Are you involved with folks who call themselves Revision-

ists?"

"I read them, if that's what you mean."

At once, he hectors me: "You know that isn't good for you. That's dangerous. That's foolish. That's harmful to your health. Why stir up memories? It will bring your stomach pains back."

"Don't worry about that."

His head doesn't move, just his eye. He clears his throat. "Some papers claim you said that Jewish and conniving go together."

"I never said that, Archie."

"Well, you came close. You better watch it, Sputnik. Some folks will read between the lines. All through that movie script, you kept on dropping hints. About the Jews. And their shenanigans. If I were you, I'd be real careful. Real careful. And I mean careful. Careful is the word."

"All right. I said all right."

"This is America. We don't agree with stuff like that. Nobody doubts the Holocaust. Besides, the Jews—they have their noses everywhere; they know how to follow the stink. They're much too powerful, if you ask me, but on the other hand, we've got to get along. There's this one Jew, for instance, approving every grant—"

"Is that a fact?"

"Around here, we are civilized. We've got to let bygones be bygones. We wouldn't want to have an odious repeat of history, now would we? In this country?"

Those are his exact words. His blustery, insincere face has turned purple, and I see tiny droplets forming underneath his nose.

"Go on."

"Well. Now." He tells the steering wheel: "What can a fellow do? The Catholics revere the rosary; the Lutherans the Trinity; the Jews the Holocaust. You better not mention that stuff. We wouldn't want to spoil the keynote, now, would we? We wouldn't want to get the delegates all hopping mad, now, would we? You can't go wrong with being inspirational and patriotic and leave the Holocaust alone. Just stick to generalities, and all

will work out smooth."

"I answer only to myself," I say, but only to myself. It's still that old, crazed fear. He still sees history, I think, through the wrong end of a distorting telescope, where every woe is magnified for them and every hurt that we endured is tiny.

Out loud I say: "Don't worry. Just don't fret. I promise you that I won't breathe a word about the Hebrew Holocaust."

"Right. Right. Let's shut the door forever on that unhappy episode."

"Right. That's my very point."

"I don't like the tone of your voice."

I say between clenched teeth: "Why do we keep on fighting World War II five decades after it was lost for Germany? We lost. And you guys won. So let it be. Just let it be. Let go. Who gains by stirring up the past?"

"Good. Fine. That is my point. Exactly. That puts my mind at ease. I'm glad you think so. Truly!" Now Archie beams with gratitude, deflating. "That's fine. Just fine. That's what I always say."

He starts to chat; he is chummy; one thing leads to another. He is not one of those who want to turn the present back into the past; the past is the past, and the present the present; you can't re-write a single page; some things were not that clear-cut in that war and some of it—well, murky.

I make another bargain with myself while sitting next to Archie: I will speak up. Tell all. One of these days, I will.

But childhood fears run deep, and I have never had the courage which, for instance, my good friend Lilo had.

Now there was bravery. When she and I were young, in war-torn Germany, my cowardice was one long, never-ending nightmare, but Lilo had the touch. She had that inner honor that shone from clear blue eyes. By contrast, even now, I am as fearful as a rabbit, as though the first part of my young life didn't count.

"Look. Over there. That's Jan's and Josie's grandsons, over there. See? You can tell who's a Neufeld, can't you?"

Right. You can't miss a Neufeld. You look at them and know there must be something to those genes that came from Apanlee. They are a clan apart. They are easy to spot by their passionate love for the soil. They aren't afraid to take risks, to experiment, to move into various endeavors. Some strange, persistent streak of genius strains hard to find expression.

One claims a patent on a gadget that attaches to up-to-date threshers. Another won three medals for streamlining the creamery. A third perfected a gate latch for cattle. They prosper, and they multiply. Their tomb stones testify.

"No bloodshed for princes and kings," they have proclaimed for centuries. And if a worldly ruler tried to tax them for their pacifist tradition, they knew precisely what to do: they packed and left and said: "Be this, again, God's will."

Determined every other way, accomplished every other way, time and again, they voted with their feet. Yet, here's my question mark: what do they know of ethnic pride? Its glory, and its cost?

I bite my lip. The town car gives a lurch.

The day has not yet melted into twilight as we glide into Mennotown.

There is a Janzen Court. There is a Harder Street. Sleek taxicabs, controlled by traffic lights, speed along Siemens Avenue, around the rim of Penner Park.

We pass the library that Josie helped to build by raising every penny with huge spaghetti feeds. It bears her husband's name.

Around the corner, to the left, we pass the place where Lizzy's sod house used to be, next to the Women's Shelter, where Little Melly's special cross stitch secrets are still taught.

Jan's steam mill, to the north of Mennotown, is now a modern restaurant, a popular tourist attraction. You can order *vareniki* there, an ethnic specialty, prepared from yellowed recipes that have been handed down from family to family—or so claims the brochure that must have cost a dime, a nickel and a penny.

I know the place; I've dined there many times. Blond, blue-

eyed youngsters serve you home-baked bread grown from the winter wheat Peet Neufeld traded from the Tartars—imported to America a century ago. A reproduction of the wheat bin Lizzy brought from the Ukraine hangs prominently on the wall, next to the framed first nickel Lizzy earned, the one she vowed she'd never spend. And didn't.

The town car purrs. It's landmark after landmark, but time has not stood still. Beside the Unemployment Office, the Friesen store still stands, updated and remodeled. Next to it, Express Mail. Not all that many years ago, it was a mirthful Noralee who did her postal clerking there. I never met her, but she lives. She lives in memory. Still shrill. Still undiminished and rotund. Now there was ethnic color!

Ah, Noralee!

She scrubbed the linens every day, way back at Apanlee. By hand, she rinsed her children's diapers in the waterhole of Apanlee; her grandchild owns a chain of Laundromats. Another grandchild runs a grocery store, filled wall to wall with peaches, plums and gooseberries, with labels telling visitors the seeds came all the way from Apanlee, sewn into Noralee's skirt hem to keep it prim across her ankles.

Child-rich but penny-poor, the moment Noralee hit prairie soil, she waylaid Doctorjay, half-Lutheran, half-Christian, the Lord at his periphery because he guzzled so! There is the corner, by that lamp post, where her husband lost his life. It has been almost fifty years since Doctorjay collided with that calf and crushed himself inside his flivver, but this is still remembered and repeated, as are the many juicy tales of Noralee who passed on before he did, whom he forsook, the moment she passed on, for Abigail—who was a Donoghue, if you remember, Sputnik!—a Donoghue, a harlot, and a flirt!

Once every two years—July through August or September, provided the weather is placid—the Elder Archibald takes senior citizens of Mennotown on trips to the Ukraine. That is his hobby now. As a sideline, he smuggles his Bibles. He snaps his Polaroids

of the abandoned and neglected steppe where, in the olden days, the tsarist Cossacks roamed and where one princeling, once upon a distant time, was fed a bowl of noodle soup by Jan's and Josie's folks. He checked the story out. A few years back, he talked the Soviet guide into a little detour, and when he found it finally, this place called Apanlee, it disappointed mightily.

"Just crumbling buildings. Broken fences. Dilapidated—floor to ceiling. High weeds between the cobble stones."

"How sad."

"A goat or two, maybe. That's all. That's all that's left. That is God's punishment for straying from the path."

His face, so jovial up to now, has become cold and hard. Now he is chewing on his mustache, overwrought. "Now, Sputnik, tell me this. Why don't we ever learn from history? Now our country is decaying. We should have learned from them. When they went godless over there, at Apanlee, that's how it all began."

"If you say so."

"Now people keep on tossing spitballs here, instead of rolling up their sleeves. Where will it end? Why can't we put an end to all the moral rot?"

He echoes many farmers, aghast at what they see. They have no name for it. They have no frame of reference. Their past has been stolen from them. You can see many crusty oldsters sitting in their rocking chairs, reading their Daily Devotions, turning page after page with huge, wheat-gnarled hands. They are the newly disenfranchised—this in a country they helped build and which is still their home.

There is no doubt that even Mennotown has started its decay in spirit and in fact. The Jensen home, now crumbling at the edges. The brand new grammar school has many classrooms—thirty, forty?—and is connected through an intercom. Neglecting the Three R's, kids learn about such things as birth control and Stay-Away-From-Drugs. The latest horror is the condom push; and worse is yet to come.

"They don't learn hymns and catechism, and prayer is outlawed," grieves Archibald.

"Well, what's your remedy?"

"Apply the paddle! Use the paddle! That's what I always say."

"I see."

"Our teachers can no longer teach; now they patrol the halls, because twelve-year-old children carry guns. Can you imagine, Sputnik? Guns! We must outlaw all guns. I'm all for gun control. We need some gun control!"

*

So here I am, in Mennotown, on Josie's L-shaped couch, next to a pumpkin of a cousin. The neighborhood is watching Donahue. The relatives make sure they don't miss Donahue, an expert baby kisser.

"The Russians are coming! The Russians are coming!" yells Phil and runs into the audience, coattails flapping, to hand somebody else the microphone. He is a Liberal. He interrupts. He heckles.

"Just what are we afraid of? In Russia, you cannot even purchase toilet paper! Their queues are stretching over city blocks! They love our hamburgers and jeans! They're eager to try on democracy for size! Why are we so afraid to lend a helping hand?"

The relatives bob heads. Here is one talk show host who knows his arguments.

"Look at Vietnam," shouts Phil, and waves his microphone and scratches his gray head. "Look at El Salvador. Argentina. Panama. Nicaragua. The Philippines. Everywhere, a thousand quarrels. Why not, instead, adopt a thousand points of light?"

When Phil gets eloquent like that, nobody has a counter-argument.

"Why not, with so much strife, adopt a world-wide policy that's fair to everyone?"

One global village? One strong government? One market

and one currency?

"His point of view, you must admit, is very hard to argue with," says Archibald authoritatively.

The folks nod to that, sagely. A thousand points of light in a revamped, re-ordered universe—they like that phrase a lot. That sounds magnificent.

"In fact, it's practically Biblical," says Archie, looking flushed.

The conversation drifts. The coffee scent is wafting. No matter what the time of day, somewhere there is a coffee pot. A cousin starts to speculate that Phil might be related to the Donoghues of Mennotown, who all vote the Democrat ticket—provided you can get them to the polls, a mighty undertaking. They're still a lazy bunch, one step removed from bums.

"Assuming they can all walk down the primrose path," as Archie puts it archly.

"There is no rousing them to any honest work—"

"They know which side their bread is buttered on, and every one of them—"

"—and every one of them is heading for the trough."

"Entitlements. Up to their dirty ears."

This makes the townsfolk mad. If they would only try—so goes the argument on Josie's L-shaped couch—they could catch the American dream. It's there. Within reach. For the asking.

"They ought to at least try to save a little more to have a nest egg for the future, but do they do it? No."

One Donoghue, for instance, is now in charge of underwriting loans that Washington doles out to subsidize the crop. He throws his weight around, that one. He sits behind his desk—feet up, smirk on his face and polish on his fingernails—and all the farmers have to go to him each fall to finance next year's harvest.

A second Donoghue has found himself a cozy nest in the ranks of Affirmative Action.

A third is busy with the homeless—hotfooting it with special airline vouchers back and forth to Washington, while farmers struggle to buy gas. And several of his older sons, still teenagers,

already make a beeline for the loot, romancing with the Blacks.

"Why mongrelize the neighborhood?" is what they want to know. They're all for giving everybody a fair shake, since this is still America. But where does it say we must mix?

Not in their Old World Gospel, still in the Gothic script.

I watch them as they warm their chairs, alone with my own thoughts. In Mennotown, the spotted owl is not important; it's politicians playing re-election games; both pro-life outcomes for the unborn innocents and pro-death punishment for hard-core criminals get thumbs-up signs; free trade is really just the only way to go; embargoing the wheat to stop the Soviets in Afghanistan upsets them mightily.

Sometimes there's benign disagreement between the young folks and the old, but one thing never changes: does anybody really think that anyone could really hurt America? The greatest country in the world? No way!

America. The Gospel is embedded in that word. In Mennotown, the Stars and Stripes have meaning.

It is a pleasant afternoon. It smells of *apfelstrudel.*

"The Hitler days are gone!" yells Phil, and runs into the audience, perspiring at the arm pits. "The Stalin times are gone! The only thing that's left is to clean up our act and do away with prejudice. If there's one lesson we have learned, it's this: We are created equal. We're all created equal."

"An agitated liberal, that's what he is," squirms Mimi, while giving Phil the evil eye. "Look at him, sidling up to Posner!"

The folks just glare at her. The Jews are less than popular in Mennotown, but still, you mind your manners. All Jews, they know, turn their opinions on a dime—to wit, this Posner fellow. Right on your television screen! That one is to be watched! They saw him switch his loyalties according to the breeze; the moment the Berlin Wall came crashing down, what did he do? He cleverly jumped horses in mid-stream, denying he had ever been at heart a Communist, maneuvering himself right next to Donahue with his philosophies.

"They are like that," says Mimi, now taunting Archibald.

"And what, precisely, do you mean by that?"

She starts to count her main points on her fingers. "No principles. No pride. No sense of self. No loyalty to anything or anyone. Say what you will, Jews just aren't lovable people—"

When she is agitated by her memories of war, my mother gets like that.

When she and I arrived in Kansas—just barely squeezing through the cracks, thanks to enduring kinship ties that helped us with our visas—she had no teeth; the Russians knocked them out when they knocked Mimi to the ground and had their way with her.

My mother, Mimi, dug herself out of the ruins of Germany. She regrets nothing to this day. When she talks of the war and aftermath, she makes the relatives just cringe, but luckily, there is no bite to anything she says; she lost her teeth; that's why.

"Our only crime is that we lost a war," claims Mimi now, and lifts a trembling chin.

I edge a little closer. She is my mother, after all, although I think of her as Mimi.

When I was born, it took her weeks before she even found a name. I never really was her child; there was no time; there was a war; the country blazed in violence. I don't remember ever sitting next to her, her arms around my shoulders.

"It was a vicious war."

Nobody in that spotless kitchen approves of the atrocities of war. They're pacifists. Not that appearances would tell. It takes a trained eye to single out a pacifist today. It's easier with the ear, for their diphthongs still give them away. They are decidedly against the sword, but they approve of troops sent to the farthest corners of the world to protect other people's right to vote themselves a democratic government as well.

They are warm-hearted people with squeaky-clean windows, clinging to custom, clinging to soil. They keep neat sidewalks; painted fences; mulberry rows along the streets amid huge fields

of waving grain. In front of every home in Mennotown, you find a flower garden. Pride in their pristine, peaceful way of life is what unites the clan.

Each year, when all the work is done, they reunite in Wichita, renew the Covenant, and give thanks to the Lord and Provider. This week, the town is full of them, all relatives so well-to-do they bypass the Ramadas; they look for Sheratons and Hyatts to showcase their success. They travel with their Samsonites so packed with double underwear and flannel gowns they don't fit in the trunks. They don't waste electricity, not even in hotels.

It is that kind of thrifty spirit that has put our astronauts smack on the moon where you weigh less and can leap high, from where you can behold the earth the way the good Lord made it—all blue and blithe and shimmering, just floating in a sable sheen as evidence of His magnificence and might.

"His favorite place in the entire universe is Kansas," claimed Archie just the other day, while blessing the Rotarians, expressing thus a patriotic sentiment that made those twenty dollar bills just float into his hat.

"I dare you here and now to find another country equal to America to live and die in, Mimi," taunts Archie, while Temperance refills his cup.

"And you have no idea," snaps Mimi and works her needle back and forth into a sock, "how late it is already. How little time is left."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"It's true. Just wait and see. It's true."

"Aw! Gee! Come on now! Don't be silly."

Those are beguiling times when Archibald has Mimi to torment and Mimi counters, tit for tat, and people keep on taking sides, half-laughing and half-furious, until the two run out of words and oldsters start to nod.

"This country is already faceless. Soon you will wish you never fought your war—"

She does not finish, knowing that the afternoon is long and

arguments have to be savored to the fullest. Those two have long since made their peace; now she is baptized properly; she'll be in Heaven, too, where he is heading forthwith.

But still, if Archie has an audience, he likes to browbeat her.

My mother, on the other hand—though in her old age she is grateful for the nest that Archibald provided sumptuously when he permitted her to move into the flat where Little Melly used to live—has never learned to yield her memories when Archie launches into one of his tirades regarding her peculiar past.

"My war?" roars Archibald. "Come on! Get outta here! It was your war! It was your Führer's war!"

"Your war! That's what I said. You heard me right. Your war!"

"You were the ones who started it. We had to finish it."

"We did not!"

"Oh, yes you did! You did! We always finish other people's wars. We always have to clean up other people's messes."

"What messes? Are you kidding? When terror struck in Russia and took our men—our sons, our husbands, brothers, fathers!—and not one family was left untouched, where was America?"

"What do you mean, where was America?"

"That's right! Where were you guys? In bed with Joseph Stalin!"

She's gathering her steam. She mentions Prussia. Estonia. Latvia. Lithuania. Pomerania. She talks about Silesia. The Balkan nations. *Ach*! Though she has told the litany of Germany's defeat so many times that everybody knows it backwards, she cannot help herself. She wipes her eyes. She blows her nose. She cries while choking on emotions:

"Sit not in judgment, you! Your ally had the bigger mustache."

She has her memories.

She still remembers how Berlin was quartered and dismembered by the Allies—a bloody quarter thrown to every victor!—while she was hanging on a curtain rod behind some draperies.

Me, too. I huddled down below, in the potato cellar.

I was still small, but I remember clearly how Soviet soldiers came repeatedly and sliced the drapes with bayonets and snapped my mother's moral fiber. It happened yesterday.

I often heard my mother say she wishes she could go and die in Germany. She dreads her resting place, she says, amid uncomprehending strangers. She was there when the Allies let the butt of righteousness fall on her *Landsers*' shoulder blades, and she stood watching, weeping, as they were herded to Siberia with crutches in their armpits and stumps where legs had been.

"The war was done, and you? Don't talk to me of crimes. You handed innocents to Russia by the millions," cries Mimi. "Talk about ethnic cleansing!"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"At point of gun, you threw your kinfolk to the wolves. Your flesh and blood! Your relatives! That isn't taught in any of your schools. All that is still a well-kept secret! A whole civilization died, because of you! Americans! and the world isn't any the wiser—"

And Archibald, maliciously: "Maybe you had it coming?"

I think: "Here's where his nasty character comes out. Now's when he shows his colors."

"We are now writing 1989," says Mimi, her old eyes bright with pain, her tea cup rattling in her hand, "and still that war goes on."

She's right. That war has never stopped. It chokes the television set. It clogs the radio. It spills buckets of slime in the paper. It spells rape of the mind, spirit and soul.

My mother was still young when she was driven out of Apanlee with bleeding heart and empty hands, caught between blazing guns of two determined dictators. Their cannons, equally, spat smoke and shells and flames across the plains of the Ukraine. She still sees all those refugees as they poured westwards, westwards, in the direction of the sinking sun through all that ice and snow, a milling, stumbling horde. Her fingers fly; her breath

comes in short gasps. "If Germany had won the war, instead of losing it because you were too dense to recognize the enemy that had you dancing to his tune, who would harp on and on about the Holocaust?"

"Look. There she goes again!"

"There isn't one of us who hasn't suffered, too. But do we bleed our neighbors? Are we moored to the Wailing Wall? Do we insist on having shrines at taxpayers' expense for a disastrous war fought half a world away?"

For Mimi, with one foot already in the grave, the wounds of that war fester on. "What Holocaust?" she wants to know, and her old, beaten, wrinkled face takes on defiance and despair. She claims she knows of not one single case of setting fire to a synagogue and burning up the Jews—at which point Archie finds a bit of wood with which to poke his teeth.

He loosens a soft belch. "You can't deny the chimneys."

There is an awkward silence in the room, and everybody looks at Mimi.

"Dreamed up in Hollywood! Trademarked in Israel. Made in America."

"Ha! Listen to who's telling!"

"How often will you send your boys as cannon fodder just so the Jews can once again put diamonds in their pockets?"

I read their faces easily. While everybody digs into the *apfelstrudel,* I watch as Archibald is working up a steam because he senses there is still some mileage left in Mimi.

"And not a child in school today," cries Mimi, "is taught the truth about what really happened. That innocents were sacrificed like cattle!"

But Archie bristles at the thought, and he is not alone. The relatives think proudly of their war—and, more so, of the aftermath. That's when the real business of recovery began, while they were rehabilitating Europe.

"You've got to grant us that! Thanks to the Marshall Plan, we rehabilitated Europe! The speed with which the country turned to rehabilitating Europe was astounding."

And to what end? That is their question mark. This unrepentant Russian-German relative—along with others of her kind whom Mennotown went to such lengths to rescue from the rubble—is still a die-hard anti-Communist, one step removed from Nazi.

The truth be put where it belongs: she never did repent. Not Mimi.

My mother could have gone to night school when she first came to Mennotown, at taxpayers expense, to be re-educated—realigned politically. The opportunities were there. But no. She simply shrugged; she never even took out papers to become a proper citizen. That still goads Archibald. He glares at her. She swallows hard, shrinks back into her cushions, and speaks so softly it is hard to understand that, thank you, never mind, don't waste your time, she has a Fatherland to last her to her grave.

I listen to that, too, while keeping to myself.

My mother and her Kansas relatives cannot see eye to eye on anything pertaining to the war. The cousins sit there, munching popcorn after popcorn, with downcast eyes and hardened heart, wearing their Sunday best and trying not to muss it.

"What in the name of common sense did you see in your Führer?" baits Archie.

"Well, he was basically a dreamer of big dreams," says Mimi, still defiant, lifting a trembling chin. The relatives inspect the ceiling as though they have never seen it before.

She tells them one more time. She says he touched the sky. She says he shook the earth.

"Had not the cripple Roosevelt been jealous of the rebirth of Germany," says Mimi, "there would have been no way the Führer would have lost. Had not his cotery of Rosenmans, Kuhns, Loebs and Morgenthaus been jealous of the success of Germany, the Führer would have won!"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"And you'll be next," she tells them with grim satisfaction.

"Ha!"

"And all your sappy talk about the greatest country in the world won't get you anywhere as long as you can't recognize what's being done to children. Your children! Your own children! In public schools. Out in the streets. In the arcades. In gang wars. Via television. These things are not mere accidents. It's planned. It's systematic wreckage. Destruction of your race. America, beset by predatory aliens subverting every law—"

That's Mimi. That's her sentiment. When she flails at her windmills, a show which only Archibald can trigger to full passion, she speaks against the guffaws in the parlor. My heart just aches for her. She has no teeth—the Russians knocked them out.

The years crept over Mimi. Her shoulders ache. Her spine caved in. Her eyes are now too dim to see the headlines, but she knows from her own experience who's who.

What's what.

She knows. My mother knows that it is still the Jews who are bedeviling the world in any way they can.

"She still thinks," whispers Temperance in the kitchen and helps herself to yet another slice of pie, "that Communism was a Jewish plot."

"They're all like that," nods Susan, a cousin thrice removed, born just before the Vietnam war. "You can't reform a Nazi." She, too, has often wondered why it is that foreigners will spread themselves all over other people's kitchens and then start arguing about those murky things the Allied armies settled half a century ago with gallows and with guns.

Right after Nuremberg, my mother came to Mennotown, so weak that she could barely crawl, with me in tow, her only living relative. She simply curled her frozen toes around her wooden clogs, crept through the rubble of Berlin, and said to some official: "I have some relatives in Kansas."

She found a law somebody dusted off, and one day, there she was, in shock that she had made it, sitting primly on a chair in Josie's sunny kitchen, me next to her, and next to me three tattered cardboard boxes containing our worldly goods—all that

was left of Apanlee.

"Well, there you are, you two," said Josephine that day. "I better call the relatives. They'll want to take a look."

In the first postwar years in Mennotown, Displaced Persons were roundly disliked, and some of that rubbed off on me in my own teenage years. Some people tried to feel compassion for that dilapidated batch of refugees that Archie helped dig out from Berlin's blackened rubble, but it was hard if not impossible: their underthings were ragged; remorse was non-existent; the trusted Faith was not for them; to heal and to conceal them in the patchwork quilt of ethnic unity was quite an undertaking.

Still, blood is blood; you don't disown a kinsman. So we were taken in.

A phone call brought them all together in a hurry. Among them was Archie, pretending we had never met. Of course I did the same. A cat dislikes a dog.

That day, old Josie cautioned with a smile: "Watch out for Archibald. All you can do, dear child, is to lay low. Just duck and keep the lowest profile possible."

She smiled when she said that. She stroked my hair and smiled.

They say it was the first time since the White House telegram arrived, informing her that Rarey had been killed, that Josie found a smile.

I'll say it here and now: My mother has a point. She did survive the trek, the fury of the elements, but not without a price. There are deep scars in Mimi, as in a million of her generation.

She spent a lifetime waiting. Though she escaped, she left behind a child, its eyelashes coated with ice; she left behind her mother, dying, wrapped in a torn and frozen *Landser's* coat. She left behind one husband in the tomb that was Siberia, another lying in his blood that seeped along the sidewalk of Berlin.

She sees Jews as a dangerous, underground power. They talk too fast and wave their arms, and their one aim—nursed over centuries—is to control the world.

"Is that another of your silly jokes?" says Archie, winking slyly, while settling down to an enormous supper. He has a grandniece, Sissie, who lives in Winnipeg and cleans and cooks for Jews. He points that out with pride that there's no racial prejudice in his own family.

"Not one small speck. Not even a faint whiff."

He says they treat her well, despite the Holocaust. He says she treats them likewise. It is well known in Mennotown that many Jewish families who chose America after the war prefer to use unmarried German relatives as maids, for almost all the European Jews speak broken German, and almost all the Kansas relatives do, too.

"Our Sissie, for example, works for four Jewish bachelors. She says they are just wonderful to her. Despite the Holocaust." He scans the parlor, a triumphant man. Who says that there is anti-Semitism in the midst of Mennotown? He even did a presentation on that topic in a synagogue for Jews, explaining how the Brethren, which is his congregation, were far and wide the only ones in the possession of the Truth, but generous with converts to a fault. He went so far as to invite the rabbis to visit him in turn and tell their point of view. They never did, alas. He wonders what he might have said that might have been offending.

But Mimi, stubbornly: "But don't you wish they would stop kvetching on and on about the Holocaust?"

"Shhh! Not so loud!" whispers somebody, fiercely, and Mimi shrinks into her cross-stitched cushions and licks her lower lip.

"You weren't there," says Mimi.

"Excuse me, but I was," says Archibald.

Those were his glory days. He is proud he was there when Ivan met Joe by the Elbe. He likes to reminisce about the times when he and his young buddies celebrated all night long because the Hun had finally been whipped. He still remembers how they climbed up on trees and poles so they could better see the Soviet trampling on the Nazi flag and spitting on the swastika.

Did she forget the many CARE parcels that kept her alive right after the war? Did she forget her Nescafe? Her cakes of soap? Her cereal?

Compared to war-torn Europe, America was full of gold, like King Tut's tomb, and he was sent to share. He, Archie, was in charge of the entire loathsome business of digging deep into the blackened rubble and finding the survivors of the war. That's what he did; he dug. That's why he came; he shared. The Elder Archie volunteered to go to Germany to help the dregs of war, expecting a country in sackcloth and ashes. And where was his reward?

That's still his question mark.

He saw first-hand how all those Huns climbed from the rubble—this was before the Marshall Plan—to pass their buckets filled with stone and ash and mortar bits from hand to hand in long, humiliating lines.

"I stayed just long enough," he tells the munching people in the kitchen who heard this story many times but listen nonetheless the way you listen to a melody that touches a rhapsodic chord, "to watch how they were caught, these so-called Führer sympathizers, grabbed by the ears like rabbits in the fields, packed into cattle cars—" He said it then. He says it now. He looks around triumphantly. "—along with the dregs of the pitiful Wehrmacht. They had it coming. All of them. They got what they had coming."

America dispensing righteous wrath on Nazi Germany is still a memory that warms his preacher belly like a flame.

"My generation had no men," says Mimi softly, still on Josie's couch, her life now winding down.

I know that story, too. The splendid warriors of my mother's youth who hurled themselves against the Bolsheviks to stop the Antichrist—they froze to death at Stalingrad; they perished in the forests of Siberia and in the coal mines of Kolyma; they died like beasts of woe in Stalin's dungeon pits. No letter ever came out of the silence of the grave.

"They died like dogs," said Mimi. "When all was said and done, there was nobody left. A woman of my generation never had a chance to lead a normal life. To love a man. To raise a healthy family."

"Not true," says Temperance, and putters about in the kitchen. "You had a suitor once."

"Sure. Hannele from Hillsboro?" sighs Mimi.

"And what was wrong with Hannele?" asks Temperance, hands on her hefty hips. "He buttons himself properly. He has a spotless past. He owns three hundred acres. He is quite popular."

That must have been right after we arrived. When Hannele saw Mimi, he had been widowed fourteen years, he said that she would do, now was the time, he was a modest man and not that picky-picky. He studied everything about my mother, thoroughly, and realized her only earthly goods were just three cardboard boxes. But Hannele came courting, nonetheless. He laid a stubborn siege.

She smiled a toothless smile. "I'd rather not," said Mimi.

Still, he came several Sundays in a row, in an old, bucking Buick that had a handle missing. He was one of those fellows who, a little short of breath but long on doggedness, can't force big words across his lips but knows how to let go of little rolling yodels when an Oktoberfest arrives. His hair was neatly brushed and parted with cold water, and he wore shoes with shiny double buckles.

He told my mother all about himself. He gave her the width of his sleeves, the breadth of his shoulders. He held strong views on evolution, excessive sports, lipstick, Jehovah's Witnesses and other moral pitfalls.

"We are made for each other," he told her and patted the spot next to him.

That was the only time I saw my mother cry.

She knew a man's love once. His name was Jonathan.

When Hitler's torch lights flickered, she was still young and beautiful. She felt the warmth of one short summer in her hair.

But then the years slipped by. Her eyes lost their luster; her step lost its bounce. Her hair turned gray, then white. Now she has rheumatism churning in her bones, and death is just around the corner. But to this day, she still remembers Jonathan.

"As I look back," she told me once, "it seems to me that only hours passed. Do you remember him? I see him vividly." Those thoughts are born of loneliness and sorrow. Most of the time, she keeps them to herself.

Yes, I remember Jonathan. His love was like a touch of wing, in service to ideals he thought could never be destroyed. Willpower. Strength. Devotion. Work. Tenacity. Pride and self-confidence. All that.

"He fought," says Mimi stubbornly, "because he thought the Soviet monster could be smitten. He loved his Fatherland, a country strong and beautiful, a land like any other land on earth that sent her sons to war—"

In Josie's spotless kitchen, she pleads with passion and conviction that Germany is surely entitled, is she not, to rest her heroes in their far-flung graves—without insults and sneers?

But Archie slurps his coffee noisily and tries to change the subject. All that is theoretical. Where Jonathan lies buried, nobody ever knew.

*

The night is cool and moonlit. The freshly fallen snow outside is delicate as lace. Around me it is dark and still, and I am glad that I am finally alone.

I always sleep in Rarey's room, dressed for the night in one of Josie's flannel gowns. I like to be alone with Rarey. I am more intimate with Rarey than I could ever be with people still alive. He, too, rests in eternity, where I will be tomorrow, where Josie dwells, no doubt. Her Bible tells me so. It's sitting on the night stand. In her old age, she started reading it, which pleased the relatives.

I pick it up, and it falls open to the passages she loved. Though

her own Faith was off-beat to the end, she loved the poetry inherent in the Scriptures as caught in that exquisite mixture of sadness and relief. And here it says, as if I didn't know: "For man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble."

That is the message that is woven in my genes.

"He comes forth like a flower," says Josie's chancy Faith, with which I, of another generation and of another world, can easily identify, never having felt the certitude that marks the simpleton. "He flees like a shadow and does not continue."

All flesh is grass, says Josie's Faith, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, because the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever.

As for man, his days are like grass; as a flower of the field, so he flourishes. For the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its own place remembers it no more.

How much did Rarey know of Apanlee that gave him life—and death?

The room is given over to his memory. For Rarey Neufeld, Josie's last-born, much-beloved son, eternity began in a sharp burst of light the U.S. government went to some pains describing.

She should be proud, the letter said; the nation grieved with her; her young son gave his life, regrettably—but in a blaze of glory while straining for the sun.

What nobler sacrifice?

It happened in the last days of the war. The city of Berlin lay way below, defeated and collapsed, convulsing in its death throes. Death, said the telegram, was instantaneous, while what was left of his young life sailed through the April clouds and fell into a tulip bed.

That's how young Rarey died—in someone's tulip bed.

The Air Force, Josie told me in that brittle voice of hers that cracked each time she spoke of her lost son, wrapped Rarey in a

silken flag, and buried him for just a little while on a small plot that gently sloped toward a river. The air that day, the letter claimed that came after the telegram, was thick and sweet with spring.

Not so when he came home to Arlington, the stars and stripes wrapped all around his casket so that his comrades had to fumble for the handle. The heavens wept that day.

"All day long," Josie told me once while doing almost all the talking, sipping tea, explaining that the European war had been a necessary evil, fought honorably, won by the strength of righteous wrath, "it rained in a light drizzle. I guess the angels cried."

I guess they did. The angels must have cried. He was an Aryan. He fought a *Bruderkrieg*—a fratricidal war

His medals, ribbons, watch and billfold, scores of old newspaper clippings, old postcards, the death certificate replete with Presidential seal and listing hometown, serial number, rank—all that is still preserved and dusted every week. Even his army jacket. The one he wore before he fell into the rubble of Berlin and landed in a tulip bed.

Said Josephine: "The honor guard shot thrice into the leaden sky—" And Josie flinched, each time, she told me decades later, while sipping tea and dabbing at her eyes, "—as though the bullets struck my heart, but I must tell you this. It's odd but true. I never felt so proud."

"A sad and rainy day," said Josephine, while telling me about the son she sacrificed to let what she called the Four Freedoms reign.

He must have believed it was so. He had been told this would be his last mission; his duty was to to rid the world of Hitler's shadow, to smash the loathsome city. He could still see the flotsam of the great migrations, still struggling on through all the rubble, cluttering the Führer's Autobahn. He held his wing tips steady. He nosed his airplane up and tried to fly out of the pall of dust and smoke—straight up into the sun. The war was almost

done; he was just about done with the barbarians; he could go home and raise a child. His first.

He reached for his binoculars and peered down at the cratered landscape. His thoughts were drifting; he was glad; he was not meant to be a soldier; he of a clan of pacifists; he saw his wife; he saw his baby boy; his heart was light and free. He plunged, released his bombs, pulled up into a climb and knew that his comrades stood by the Elbe, waiting for the Russian bear—and at this moment, down below, it happened.

I saw it; I was there.

As he descended carefully, he may have realized he came into some anti-aircraft fire. Maybe. And maybe not. I often think of that. He may have vaguely realized that someone, down below, was nipping at his silver wings with a well-oiled and swinging ack-ack gun—and that, on any other day he might have been more cautious!—but on this day, his thoughts were with his wife and child, for word had come. At last.

"The war was over. Finally. The Führer's dream was dead."

When Josie told me that, one sunny afternoon that baked the prairie soil, a burly youth, born six months after World War II, named after a forgotten forebear who traded, so the story goes, those first blessed kernels from the Tartars that feed the world today, materialized out of the kitchen and sat beside her silently and gently stroked her hand.

"The angels cried. The angels cried. The angels cried," young Peet consoled his grandmother, as though it were a litany. "Remember how it rained? One of those good old country rains that drench the land so that the earth renews?"

I know that kind of rain. There's nothing like it. Nothing.

I will tell you a secret. It doesn't even have a name, but it exists. Believe me it exists. The force of nature can't be stopped. It rises from the earth. It's gathering at the horizon. It will arrive and drench America; for she is parched for rain. The leaves and the grass have stopped growing. The fields lie sapless. Barren. Thirsting. The soil—Jan's soil, Peet's soil—cannot renew until it rains again.

Now between wakefulness and sleep, I finally face up to Erika—as she was then; not as she is today. It is as though I see a double feature—first one side, then the other.

First I see Rarey, young and kind and full of life and nothing but goodwill and certitude. Then I see Lilo, likewise.

And there is Erika, still without words, still non-descript. Right in the middle. Scared.

In California, I hardly ever think of Erika, as busy as I am. But here, in Rarey's room, she comes alive as though by magic—a slim, young thirteen-year-old girl in Hitler uniform perched next to a small anti-aircraft gun, right on a Berlin rooftop, and at her side a wounded man. With SS epaulets.

Her name was Erika. His name was Jonathan. Both came from Apanlee, where duty was writ large.

He was a German soldier, a convert to the Mystic Cross—the cult of Blood and Soil and Race. It was a cult as arbitrary, all-embracing, monolithic, absolute, authoritarian as Archie ever could have wished. She was an honor student, one of those tiny timid females caught in the Führer's war, all thumbs and toes, still much too babyish—but that would change; she was resolved that it would change, consumed as she was in those last sad days of war with a raw will to live, to fight against the cowardice that was the dragon of her youth, and has been ever since.

True. Erika survived. The war was over, and she lived. All life was ashes, but she lived. Not that it mattered, but she lived. How? On numb feet across a dead city, that's how.

She survived because she had hidden herself in the ashcan the psychic had spoken about. She crouched in that ashcan, hour after hour, while all around her, roof by roof and house by house, a city flew apart.

The stars kept raining bombs. The guns belched ceaselessly. The ashcan was dented all over.

Then it grew light. The noise died down. The hissing and sputtering stopped. The shelling fell off around dawn. The

airplanes that had tried to blow all life to smithereens miraculously vanished. The sun came out—a bloody ball three times its size, monstrously magnified by all the dust and smoke.

Berlin was Ghost City, writ large.

With hands that were trembling with terror and chill, she lifted the lid and crawled out.

It hurt to walk. It hurt to sit. It hurt to breathe in air. The streets were lit with fire, the sky was crimson still, the trees stood beheaded and the neighbors were dead. She guessed it might be Tuesday—scrap day! to go from door to door collecting papers, clothes, bones, helmets—anything!—to help the Führer's war along, but one quick glance sufficed to know that that was foolish, verily! as useless as her ration vouchers dated yesterday.

What fighting there still was had now dispersed into the side streets and small alleys. She sensed a breathing spell.

She sat down at the rim of a bomb crater, half-filled with dirty water. A main line must have broken; the water still gurgled and seeped. Something was floating there, but luckily face down.

She looked around. The streets were foul with refuse. A coward had unfurled a banner from the window, and it was white, the color of surrender. That gave her a brief jolt, but she composed herself.

She carefully sidestepped the carcass of a burned-out bus and came upon a weeping toddler who reached for her and clung to her—a snot-smeared child with sunken eyes, no older than three years. He was a trying sight. His soles were charred, and that was sad. She wondered what to do. She hesitated, undecided, then bent to him and lifted him into a suitcase, spilling things. She freed herself from his small fists still clutching at her skirt as though they were two burrs. Though he whimpered and sniveled and wouldn't let go, she patted him briefly and walked.

She rallied all her strength still left to find the street where Heidi lived. It, too, was black with death.

Her chest felt tight and prickly as she kept looking hard.

Stalled trucks and burnt-out automobiles lined the street and blocked her way; she scrambled, dazed and blinded, across all obstacles, some of them smoking faintly. As she stood, contemplating her next step, a tank came barreling around the corner, and she ducked just in time. She watched it crush the tulips. That's when it came to her that this was Heidi's house that took the bomb smack on the roof. She knew it by the tulips.

She found the mail box next. Some giant fist had crushed it flat, but Heidi's name was legible. She stood silent, not even surprised.

Small fires were eating away at the rafters, creating black gaps in the rubble. There was a deep hole where the cellar had been; small wisps curled from the ashes.

She didn't weep. There was no point in weeping over Heidi who would remain in that rubble forever. She simply sat down, in the ashes.

She would never feel young again. Ever. There might be a tomorrow still, but yesterday was gone. Her former self was gone. It had died, exhausted from hurting.

She sat there for the longest time until a soft thing nudged at her, and that was Lilo's pet. He had no tail and only three legs, and his left eye was hanging by a sinew.

"Well, Winston Churchill. It's all over now," she said to Lilo's pet, amazed she still had words.

The mutt gave a whimpering sound.

A veil of dust hung in the air. The cloud of ashes was so thick the sun could not break through. The world she had known lay in smoldering ruins, but she was hungry; she would eat. She kept looking for something to eat, and she found it before it was noon: a bone that looked like a thigh bone. The fire had gnawed off the flesh. She didn't know if it was man or beast, but she would take her chances. She took a brick and crushed it. She slurped the marrow, raw.

Now there was sweet contentment in her belly.

She decided to check up on Lilo. Somebody had to check,

and so she did; she checked. The pet helped some; he whimpered and hobbled, three-legged.

Lilo lay where she had fallen, a soldier for the cause. She lay supine and very still, her young lips pale and slack. Her sooty face was gray. Her blond, fat braids were singed. Someone had violated her in death; had rammed a flag pole's sharpened end from in between her legs into her twisted body with such force that it stuck out where Lilo's lusty heart had beaten for the future. Yesterday.

Was that a shock? Well, yes and no.

Her knees were buckling, but she looked. Her eyes were blurring, but she looked. And then she did something that came by itself. Her arm shot out; she stood straight; she gave Lilo the Führer salute.

Her name was Erika. That was the timid girl I knew, so many years ago.

She is no longer part of me; I have disowned her to survive; but once upon a distant time, I knew her well indeed. She gave Lilo the Führer salute. It was the only thing still left to do, the most natural thing in the world. It wasn't that she felt the need to be dramatic; or blasphemous; or obstinate; there was no irony in that; she wasn't trying to say anything or make heroic gestures. She stood in a world bereft of all landmarks, and gave over her heart to the wind.

That's how I still see Erika—this after all these years—saluting her brave and defiant and beautiful friend who blew a lot of bubbles each morning as she brushed her teeth, who dreamed the day would come when she would shine on celluloid, who had a whole life to look forward to, who always scolded Erika:

"Where is your spirit, girl? It's for the Fatherland—" and whom the Allies killed.

The firing fell off around noon. Cheap cotton flags, with pentagrams, the logo of the Antichrist, stitched onto them by hand, appeared and fluttered down from blackened, gutted windows.

Two were still left. Alive.

A soldier and a girl were left, alone, atop a bombed-out edifice, the moon-lit night around them, while down below, Berlin lay in its death throes. He knew his wound was mortal, but there were calm and fealty in his face; he had one last devoted little comrade, next to him, a little girl in Hitler uniform, who did her duty neatly, who carried to him food and drink and what morsels of news she could gather. He had a small transmitter. He broadcast for as long as someone still took messages.

The anguish coming from his wounded leg had thickened his speech and glazed his vision; his leg was badly gangrenous.

She said to him. "In every door, a drunken Russian."

"I know."

By then, she had stopped counting. It happened day by day.

She took that risk; she carried food and drink and news, bypassing monsters wearing pentagrams on furry caps, prowling in search of loot and mayhem, who jeered and ordered her: "*Komm. Komm. Frau, komm.*" Sometimes they saw how young she was, and then they called her *Fräulein.*

They said: "*Komm, Fräulein. Komm.*"

Then they would grab her by her hair and treat her cruelly, and even when she tried to hide herself beneath some blankets, say, or maybe in the straw, depending on the situation, they jabbed at her with pointed bayonets and grabbed her by the ankles and pulled hard. And she would go with them and once again endure.

At night, she would sit, shivering, within the bend of Jonathan's good arm that lay in a warm scoop around her narrow shoulders. He was a man. She was a girl. Love comes in many shades.

The moon was throwing shadows when he said: "I want you to remember that there are absolutes worth knowing. They have nothing to do with the outcome. The outcome can be bought. Or forced. Or swindled. Or connived. But absolutes cannot."

He said to her while giving her his legacy atop a dying city:

"Some win, and others lose. Some die, and others live. The losers are forgotten in defeat; the winners write their history. The winners do their cartwheels; the losers have no voice. And in the end, who counts the medals? Anyone? Will anybody ever read the balance sheet correctly? But always you remember: there is a history worth knowing. The earth has rights. It belongs to the bravest and best."

She took his hand and stroked it. Her fingers felt their way along a scar.

"A dog bit you?"

"No, not a dog. A little girl. A little cousin I once loved. It happened long ago."

She did not ask: "Why are you telling me? As if I didn't know."

She quietly listened as he said: "If you survive, you'll have a mission, Erika. You are a child of gifted fancy. Here's what you must remember, always. There is a story to be told. Don't touch up anything."

She had just finished changing Jonathan's blood-soaked, earth-crusted bandages, when she looked up and saw two men in speckled uniform. One of these men was huge and black. Colossal. Towering. Her hands flew to her lips and she shrank back against the wall, for she had never seen a Negro, ever, not even in a photograph. The other one was gangly, vague, with sanctimonious brows; he looked excitable and edgy in a simmering, smoldering way.

"Gum?" asked the Negro, grinning, chewing, inspecting her with a black glitter in his eyes.

Gum. *Komm.*

She had endured an avalanche of rape. The words were practically identical. He had fat thumbs, fat cheeks; he rolled his l's and r's; his neck was purple and bombastic and he was shifting chewing gum from cheek to cheek while looking for an opportunity to pounce. His hands had vanished, fumbling, in his trousers, but both his thumbs stuck out, and they were wiggling now.

He was the worst of feral beasts out of her many nightmares, but his companion, freckled, weasly, looked vaguely familiar.

"Well, well. This will be a day to remember," said the black paratrooper and nodded in a significant way, while the second, the blond one, leaned forward and said, slightly slurred:

"Well, I'll be damned! Look what we found. A real live Nazi girl."

The C.O. volunteers of Mennotown did not wear guns, and Archie didn't either, but that night, to be safe, Archie had borrowed one as he and his black pal stepped out into the dark to calm their jagged nerves.

It had been a harrowing day.

He had arrived in Germany with all the best intentions, and he was sickened in his soul. One of the first relief cohorts sent overseas to comb through the rubble and pick up survivors, Archie was trying hard; intent on building goodwill with the burlap sacks of Mennotown, setting a splint to a world out of joint. That day, he had worked sixteen hours at a stretch; his head was throbbing with revulsion and fatigue. He, Archie Epp, may not have finished high school, but was he anybody's fool?

He understood one thing: of remorse, there was none. These people, whom he tried to help, were still disciples of the Führer.

He had enlisted, taken pity, packed his bags, forsaking his soft bed in Kansas. And he expected gratitude. Remorse. Contrition. Penitence. And there was none of that.

But prayers must come first, insisted Archibald, reared in the Faith and, hence, affirming Faith and, yes! obedience. Obedience writ large! He was proud of his pacifist mission. He cut the straps to let the losers get an eyeful of the riches of a land that stressed equality and, hence, reaped peace and harmony: dresses and shirts, shoes and socks and sweaters—all items to alleviate the suffering of war. Little Melly's Christian spirit was alive in every patch and stitch; he smelled that in the smell of mothballs; he felt it in his fingertips.

He tried to talk to them. He tried to listen to their stories, but what they told him made no sense at all.

"You're mercenaries for the Beast," said one, and others nodded gravely. They told him even then: "You'll find out soon enough."

They said: "We're innocent. It's you, Americans, who bear the guilt for what will happen next. We tried to finish off the Antichrist. We tried to stem the tide."

They didn't look so innocent to him. "You're criminals," he told them, sparing no one, then or now. "You're scum. The worst. You're hooligans."

They looked at him with glassy, apathetic eyes. It was too much. It was plain overload. His spectacles fogged up. He was sick to death of them all—all famished, sick and weary, with vermin in their hair and hunger in their eyes, still loyal to their Führer. The devil's brood they were, as far as he could tell—this untidy flotsam of war, no doubt flag-waving all the way to prison or, better yet, goose-stepping to Siberia.

Which was just fine with him!

He was building a murderous rage. He needed to cool off. That's when he motioned to his Negro friend who pocketed one gun and handed a second to Archie.

Together, they stepped out into the streets to draw a breath of air, and that is when he spotted it—the shredded parachute still hanging from a tree. And that's when every shred of pacifism went like poof! and Archie knew that, given provocation, he, too, would kill.

He'd kill the Hun! He'd finish off the Hun! Without remorse! With gusto!

This was Archie's murderous moment.

Ever since that rock, hurled hard against his people's ethnic pride, had ripped out his right eye and forced him to his knees, he had kept rage inside. And that's precisely when he heard a strange, suspicious sound, pushed open a burned door, stepped gingerly into the hall, and found those two: the trembling Hitler girl beside the wounded *Landser.* And something snapped in Archie.

His lungs filled up with wrath. He knew that this was it. All guns had fallen silent; peace had already been declared, and there

they were, the viper's brood, manning their anti-aircraft gun still pointed at the sky.

A wave of fury flooded Archie's chest with an enormous whoosh! He touched the barrel; it was hot; he could have sworn it was still hot. He could not pry the girl's hands from the barrel.

"Don't move, or I will shoot," he bellowed, which was superfluous because he knew he would—this was his opportunity. It would not slip away. His unit leader had a German wife from Pennsylvania, one of those old and stubborn crusts who stuck to ethnic pride, through thick and thin, against all better evidence. If his commander knew this Nazi riffraff, hiding here, evading justice, were counting on American largesse, he'd botch the opportunity.

"Are you Ameri—" the German soldier said but did not finish what he meant to say, for Archie had his finger on the trigger. It curled around the bolt.

"You bet I am," said Archie. "You bet your blasted swastika I am." He said to her: "You little viper! You! Now move! You heard me! I said move!" while his black buddy lumbered forward clumsily. "Gum? *Fräulein*? Gum?" he asked, for lack of better words.

She saw the huge, black hands still fumbling in the pockets of his trousers. The *Landser* saw it, too; he swung around and felt with his good hand for his own gun, and that's when Archie pulled the trigger. It gave him a sweet rush. The barrel went poof! and the *Landser* fell back and was dead.

The little girl in Hitler uniform was hiccuping.

But Archie wasn't finished yet. He gave her an enormous shove and said in halting German, thick with the diphthongs of four centuries:

"Now, listen, you! You little runt! This war is over, and you lost! You lost! You lost! You lost!"

Yes, Archie, that was you. That was your side. You told it to exhaustion.

Here, now, speaks Erika.

# Chapter 1

What do we know of Erika? This much: her script was set more than four centuries ago. Her ethnic roots go deep into the soil of martyrdom.

Her ancestors were dogged folks of Faith, committed to a restive monk who took his friar's lantern, shone it on the ancient script, and found a zealous God who bade him break with Rome so as to stand apart.

Confessing to be born-again in olden days risked being broken on the rack, torched at the stake, imprisoned, branded, drowned—for little mercy did the Holy Roman Empire have for those who felt they needed to profess their sovereign pledge to God.

An outlaw he became, this feisty ancestor of bygone days who spurned monastic rule—an outlaw and a fugitive, dogs on his heels and a high bounty on his head, for years evading persecuting Papists and rapacious overlords with prudent skill and trickery.

He was of peasant origin, this founder of a stubborn sect,

born in a village a few miles inland from a dark and frenzied sea—a man of penetrating mind, of unremitting ardor. He said and wrote, since there was no tomorrow:

"What if they burn our bones to ashes? What if they rip our tongues to shreds? What if they blind our eyes? There is no death blow to our cause. Watch love and brotherhood spread through the efforts of merchants and weavers, and know that, in the end, the peaceful always win—"

You had to be a saint to speak like that in times when European lords wrought chains of war across the land by choice and by necessity. They were unpopular, this small, determined band of rebel pacifists who spread God's message fast and far.

It was a message, they believed, aglow with hidden strength. And so it must have been—for neither torture nor the grievous plights of years of homeless wandering could weaken their impassioned message in the least. Their *Martyr's Mirror* testifies how willingly they suffered for their Faith: it tells of galley slaves who perished on high sea, of foreheads marked with scorching irons so others would refuse them food, tongues torn from throats to stop the spread of heresy—that's how they lived and died.

By the ax they died on Alba's many scaffolds, those first fierce Anabaptist sufferers for Christ—but not before this one, that one had sired yet another child to take the light and keep it burning in a dark and vengeful land.

Nobody silenced them. Nobody could.

Whole generations came and went, and still the Anabaptists spoke, and still they testified while dying by the hundreds by stake, rack, sword—for peace.

For many years, they wandered back and forth along the North Sea coast, for kings and overlords had use for them as drainers of their marshes. They knew of dikes and dams. You glimpse that in their names: Dück. Dyck. Dirk. Dirksen. Derksen. In time, they settled in the swamps of Prussia—for many years, obscure. Just when the first ones settled in the region which became the Polish Corridor, nobody knows for sure. Most were of Frisian

and Flemish stock—as written in their blue eyes, blond hair, in their strong and swaying gait, in names like Fröse, Friesen, Riesen.

Despised for their poverty, yet they were envied for their skills and diligence. They took a bitter bread out of the mouths of natives, and hate and jealousy grew strong. They could not trade in various Free Cities. Their children had no rights before the law. For decades, they could not inherit property. Their Elders could not preach at funerals, for fear they would mislead a weakened soul.

Forced thus to stay among themselves by circumstance and feudal rule, their Elders said: "This suits us fine. This way, we need not suffer pagans, fools and sinners."

A haughty mindset blossomed forth.

For centuries, no stranger found his way into this close-knit brotherhood. No new blood came to them. The years of isolation even spawned a special tongue. Go to Nebraska. Kansas. The Dakotas. Winnipeg. Go visit Reedley, in the heart of California. Tucked deep into the orchards, you'll find Low German still.

"No guns and spears. Just Christ," plain folks aver in drawn-out, awkward diphthongs, as centuries ago their founder once proclaimed. And draft boards during war have no more use for them today than kings and overlords had in the past.

"No swords for sons of saints," they say.

"No bloodshed. Ever. Not by our hands," they said for centuries.

They said it long enough, and lived by it with kith and kin, until even hard-headed rulers admitted: "Truly, these are the children of peace who have beaten their swords into plowshares—"

At a time when rich men still powdered their hair and a horse could be bought for three *Pfennig*, a strong-willed Prussian king gazed wistfully across his land, impoverished and battle-torn, and longed to fuse a country. A delta was partitioned. The sect fell to

his lot.

"My enterprising citizens," he called them with great pride. He bade his ministers to leave alone his artisans: his weavers, cobblers, lantern tinkers, dikers, millers, farmers.

In turn, they gave him gifts of gratitude: two well-fed oxen, four hundred pounds of butter, a flock of fattened ducks. Not being folks content with doing anything by halves, they also gave him a petition: "Are we still free from mandate to shed precious human blood?"

"There is a kingdom to enlarge," said he.

"We have a separate Lord," was their reply.

He did not mind their God. He minded losing husky, long-legged boys to military service. He taxed them many *Thalers* for military schools. The Elders stood aggrieved, for other lords had drained their pockets with taxation for their wars.

The king's recruiting marshals kept casting greedy eyes upon their strapping sons. Their villages turned into hives of discontent.

Where to? What now? Was there a way out of this festering dilemma?

At just that time, a shrewd and daring princess, born to the humble House of Hesse and married to a half-wit of the House of Romanov, was busily threading her way through a maze of courtly intrigues. Barely had she reached the throne of Russia than she made clever wars with Poland and Turkey. To feed her burning ambition to extend her empire to the shores of the Black Sea, she seized vast patches of steppe from wild, disheveled tribes whom she forced willy-nilly from ancient grazing ground.

"Be gone, ye vermin, ye!" she said, steeped in conviction of her might.

The heathen fought their dispossession hard: the steppe had been theirs for centuries. Blood-thirsty tribes fell upon helpless Russian villages, stole children, calves and horses, and put the torch to property.

The empress, with a will to rule and do it well, fought many a

boisterous battle, forcing them eastward and trying to keep them at bay. To make her conquest stick, she needed the bulwark of orderly, civilized souls to keep borders secure and barbarians out. And in her strong, impatient hands lay millions of black, fertile acres.

She released a batch of tempting manifestos, as a cat might litter kittens. She flooded the land of her birth with land scouts, proclaiming:

"Come any, come all! Vast fortunes are yours for the asking along the Black and Caspian Seas. Free land in abundance. Protection by the Crown. Unfettered self-rule. And freedom from conscription."

All this at a time when the pacifist creed bore the yoke of increasing and unfair taxation, when Elder after Elder scowled at the Soldier King repeatedly and told him stubbornly: "No swords for our sons! Not under any guise!" And saw him turn away and frown.

This offer coming from a land called Russia was tempting to people much oppressed. The agents of the empress coined the lure that carried fire: *Lebensraum.* The word is nothing new. Its call is deep in people such as Erika. They hear it constantly.

Small wonder that her forebears cocked their ears and listened carefully and knew: fat, virgin, fertile acres for their kin—so they could grow and prosper in the Lord, and multiply, and fill the earth with blond and blue-eyed children.

The Elders sent their land scouts to investigate. After having seen and sniffed the soil, the sleuths returned with frozen toes but favorable opinions. They told magical tales in the churches of Danzig. In person, they had met the empress and her court.

"Soil. Fat. Black. Virgin acres."

They knew it was God's will that they pack up and cast their lot with Russia. Two hundred years ago these pious people heard the Russian-German Empress say, desiring greatly that the world think well of her:

"No lice. No sloth. No criminals. No Jews."

Thus started Erika's forebears walking a difficult, untrodden path.

The poorer came on foot, the middle class by river barge, the rich and elegant by carriage. By the thousands they came, in the decades that followed—some pushing wheelbarrows, others riding haughtily with servants, guides, and guards. They came because the agents of the crown had talked with honeyed tongues: "A land of opportunities beyond the dreams of men—"

Regrettably, they found there was no paradise. Nothing but tall grass, gray sky, myriads of field mice, and thieving, marauding Tartars who stole cattle, worshipped Allah, and slurped the blood of goats.

Lesser men would have despaired.

They built some hasty dug-outs—pathetic hovels that soon filled with hunger, illness and despair. They shivered through the winter as ice floes drifted down the Dnyeper River, as cold air from Siberia knifed across the barren plains.

The Empress tried to help. The food she sent spoiled on the way. The building lumber disappeared. The money vanished into the pockets of crooked, devious couriers. The pious German pioneers who had arrived in search of *Lebensraum* were much too weak and poor to try to make it back.

How many perished that first year? The archives do not tell.

Some dug in deep, as Peter Neufeld did, a man with expert hands and fierce ambition. He came, and he would stay.

With the help of his young son, he built a crude sod shanty, relying on his skills, his dogged will to live, his rugged perseverance. Others, perhaps more fatalistic, perhaps more trusting in the Lord, stayed in their hooded wagons, from where they prayed to Heaven day and night. Among them was Hans Epp, a self-appointed Elder who had been saved from a mysterious illness and born-again for Christ while still a paltry child.

The Lord, saith he, was good. He gave and took, blessed

always be His name.

A son was born to him beneath the wagon covers.

The baby brought him meager joy: it killed his wife. She stiffened with cold and her spirit departed, despite many *amens* and heartrending wails beseeching the Maker for mercy.

This Elder, however, came amply endowed with the zeal of the righteous. When, in his mix of happiness and grief, he opened his trunk to ready himself for a sermon, he found that someone had stolen his boots. Instead, there were rocks in his pouches. Some pilferer along the way, to cover up his thievery, had put them there to trick him.

For a moment, he stood overwhelmed, thinking of the sweat and pain his wheelbarrow had drained out of his brittle bones as he pushed it along, on foot, all the way from the Vistula plains.

"Be this, as well, God's will," he sighed.

The road had worn the Elder's strength but not his voice or spirit. He could still preach, he could still sing, and he did both, and ringingly—he stood beneath a gray, indifferent sky and preached the first of many sermons.

"Beloved brethren," cried the Elder, bracing himself with shivering arms. "Behold, I may have lost my wife and boots, but I did wash my feet—I washed them thrice, in honor of the Holy Trinity. Thus, I stand clean and willing and obedient before the Romanovs who called me here, before my Lord who will provide. Let us draw lessons from adversity. Let us be thrice as honest. Thrice as clean. Thrice as humble and obedient, so as to set a laudable example and counteract bad luck."

He dug a grave. He swaddled the infant. Each day, he said a triple prayer and sang a triple hymn. The pious flock did likewise.

He had obediently signed a promise to the Crown that for all times to come his people would conduct themselves with dignity, refrain from quarreling and drink, and keep their young from eating green apples. His older sons were fine—each born, bred, baptized properly. But Willy, last in line, turned out to be a sickly

child, given to numerous nosebleeds and sniffles.

"Be sure not to venture too far—" he admonished the lad who was begging early to be taken on the road to find the needy and the bedfast while braving winds, storms, rains and often vicious blizzards, "—because of wolves and Tartars, because of Lutherans and Catholics and Jews—" The ardent Elder was so busy gospeling and seeking out assorted sinners to convince them of the errors of their ways that he would sometimes leash his offspring to a tree and then forget him there, finding him at night again, starved silly, shivering and bawling.

As a result young Willy, sad to say, grew featherbrained, but discipline and many timely prayers made of the boy in no time short a qualified, obedient son who bowed his head, crossed all ten fingers willingly, and memorized with halting tongue his father's cast-off sermons, for lo! to let a free tongue reign was boastful—a grave and untoward sin.

At the idle age of nine, Willy Epp experienced his conversion and was thus born again. Early on, he fit himself to a life of holy service, having learned the useful diatribes of conduct early at his father's knobby knees. In later years—in middle life and deep into old age—the Elder Willy never varied either his opinions or his sermons.

"Where weeds grow in abundance," he would thunder, as his father thundered now, "our food will grow as well. There is no steppe dry enough the Lord can't send a cloud—"

The Lord sent clouds. Rains made the mud huts muddier.

The Devil tried in other ways to bring calamities to aggravate the pious clan: typhoid, smallpox, choking sickness, cholera. Oldsters succumbed, but youngsters were born. Horses and cattle were stolen or lost for lack of fences, but cows kept on producing calves, and horses brought forth foals.

To guard against marauders, the brethren settled in tight villages of thirty homesteads each. Every village boasted to the next in tribal, thick Low German: "A butcher. A blacksmith. Two cobblers and three carpenters."

They were racial and proud; they were separate and clannish; yet they were also practical in scope. Every farmer soon had equal access to a midwife, a bonesetter, a clock tuner, a coffin maker, a cartwright, two vigilant Elders flanking each village who told them, instructed by Willy: "There is no steppe dry enough the Lord can't send a cloud—"

And still they came out of the west, in creaking, covered wagons. Every new trek brought precocious love, autonomous and willing to be married. The new arrivals reinforced the Elders' influence, for each young pair was told a dozen times: "Be an example of persistence, decency and order, and teach your children diligence and self-control—"

Some died too soon, but more were readily born—all born to a life blessed with labor, all rising early, working hard, their faces to the sun. They all had freckled noses, cheeks that shone like polished apples, hair thick and straight and bleached as sun-drenched straw.

"The width of Russia," said Peter Neufeld, choked with joy, "is hardly large enough to settle them—" and watched them straddle the beloved steppe with their proverbial silent strength.

Aryan settlements sprang up all over southern Russia, and all of them were pious. Had some proclaimed them coarse and backwards for their simple, traditional ways? Perhaps in bygone days, in the Kingdom of Poland, the Duchy of Prussia, hampered by unwise lords and unfair taxation, with not a plot of land to call their own. Not here. Not now. The days were long and hot. The work was hard and heady. Life was a joyous battle for their children's future and for the coming Kingdom of the Lord.

A boy, before he was twelve years of age, would jump into his trousers to beat the sun, to lead an ox, to pull a plow, to shame a lazy neighbor. A maiden, before she would marry and start dropping baby after baby right into the scented clover, would swing a broom and spin the yarn and milk a stubborn goat with strong and nimble fingers.

In times of peace the skies are clear. The children's eyes are

luminous.

Peet, eldest son of Peter Neufeld, grew to early manhood in those pioneering years. He learned from the example of his father, who came with ample testimonials to his fine past and wondrous capabilities.

This man could cure malaria, boils and dizziness, and he could even banish freckles. There was free bird and fish catch in his records. In the Vistula plains, he had wrestled the land from the swamps. Here was a patriarch of wisdom and humor and spirit, not so easily driven to prayers, not so prone to lean on the Lord—not by the weeds as high as his heart nor by the blistering winds; not by the numerous field mice nor by the frequent marauders.

"Look at this tree," he told his son. "See the sap? Spring is but a fortnight coming. We'll seed two crops per year—" The records tell us tersely, furthermore, that he could read with ease and speed—much faster than the Elder Epp, although the latter had, by far, the louder, heartier voice.

"The more pious the farmer, the healthier the crop," the Elder preached with meaning.

"There is no time to lose," said Peter Neufeld, parrying.

"Why hurry in the face of centuries?" the Elder cried with heat.

"The evening will be wiser than the morning."

"Time is not tied to a post. Eternity is but a stone's throw away."

"Let's seed first, then pray hard the seed will sprout and prosper."

"Why not first order your life in the sight of the Cross?"

"Time doesn't stand still. You have to move forward." The sinner paid no heed. Beside him walked his son whose mind leapt over boundaries.

At the bank of a small tributary river, the father said: "Right here."

He put his shovel to the ground. Where others saw nothing but wasteland, his father's heart saw gold.

"The sleep of the steppe has come to an end," he told Peet, who stood, silent, beside him. "A life of abundance is yours, to be drawn with your hands from this earth. This land will yield to you. This soil holds moisture in great volume."

The air was fresh and balmy. Peet's young heart hammered with hard joy.

"The word," his father said, "is *Lebensraum.*"

There was a wooden plow, brought all the way from the Vistula plains. He pulled it from the thickets, along with an unwilling ox.

"Let me," said Peet in soft Low German. "Let us plow deep while sluggards sleep."

Its blade cut into fatty sod as though a knife had cut into the heart of Russia. A father watched. A son stopped short where earth touched sky and fused them to a dim horizon. A haze was lifting from the trees. Peet's bare toes crusted with the earth. His young mind all but reeled.

"Right here," called Peet, while pointing to the place where buttercups and dandelions raised their sassy heads each May, a piece of land next to a languid stream that found its way into the sea. At its mouth, farther down, the Russian town Berdyansk grew sluggishly.

Thus, long before he was a man, or so the chronicles recall, Peet Neufeld spied himself a splendid parcel and called it Apanlee.

# Chapter 2

A plow, a rake, a fork, a prayer—such were his tools, such was his start. Perhaps a mare or two. Who knows? On details, the archives are sparse.

We may assume he built a modest home at first. The Crown may have furnished the lumber. He wove twigs and straw into the walls. He sealed the roof with mud and clay to keep the thatch in place.

Perhaps he calculated after rains washed it away repeatedly: "If I attempt to slant the roof just right so that the angle of the raindrops hits the angle of the thatch stuck to the angle of the rafters—" Young Peet possessed a strong and curious mind, forever searching pathways into knowlege.

In time the Empress, charitable to the settlers, passed away. The tsars who took her place knew, one by one, that she had chosen well when, by a lucky stroke of pen, she had settled the devout in the south of her realm, not far from the newly-formed Valley of Jews.

The settlers multiplied and prospered. There was lard in the pantry, food on the table, Faith in tomorrow, joy in today. The

meadows filled with fat, complacent cows. The sun sent rays into the thick of leaves and sweetened orchards, one by one.

"Self-rule," they said, "suits us just fine. No mingling with outsiders."

There was no need to keep themselves authentic by government decree, for they carefully governed themselves. More diligent, harmonious citizens could not be found in all of Russia. Their doors all faced the street in unison, each path connecting to the neighbors' paths, measured to equal width and length. Everyone knew everybody, left and right and fore and aft, and watched each other's conduct. As they met after work by the well, at the store or by the fence, they made sure their gossip kept that edge, well-honed and keen enough to guard a proud existence.

First and foremost, it was Willy who ensured a stranger recognized a German villager from lesser men who might have practiced worthless ways. From house to house he went, a tireless servant of God, to hone and sharpen souls and build their ethnic pride: "Stand tall. Speak truth. Bring work and joy to Russia and honor to His Kingdom."

And thus, a German settler was seldom heard to swear, to lie, to cheat, to steal, to foist a fraud upon a fool, covet his neighbor's wife, or entertain a lusty thought—smoke thrice as thick as Russian smoke would billow from his chimney.

While Willy kept his church without a spot or scratch, Peet kept neat count of village council meetings and new arrival charts. Refined and mannerly, he could converse with ease on nearly any topic. He studied maps, committing them to memory for laying out new villages—and soon a gray, despairing landscape became a lush and thriving garden, with Apanlee the hub, and lesser homesteads serving as the spokes.

His neighbors said with pride: "Peet's tongue tips the scales of the tsars."

"The desert shall rejoice and blossom so long as we obey the Lord," the Elder Willy would proclaim, and Peet would hear that and stand tall, in his proud heart such joy and loneliness as is

given only to the best of men in rarest times.

He knew: "No brakes on the future. No limits to what we can do. The door is wide open. Our children need only walk through."

"No patchwork for the Lord," said Willy cautiously.

Peet's pride near burst his heart. He stood, a man in a world made for manliness, knowing: "Mine for the asking—cucumbers and cabbage, seeds and pumpkins, squash and watermelons, beans and cherries and apples and pears, horses and cattle, fat flocks of geese, hundreds of serfs, thousands of sheep, and as early as tomorrow—" Here was his chosen country—Russia the Vast, Russia the Bountiful, to be broken, molded and transformed by his plow.

Soon, Russian peasants stood in awe outside the stately gates of Apanlee, this one or that one proclaiming: "The same rain. The same soil. The very same sunshine. How is it possible? Look at the Germans—a separate God?"

Peet gave to the Lord's ever-widening Kingdom, using both hands as a matter of fact—whether it be rubles, time or counsel or tiles as hard and durable as could be found in all of Russia.

"For all eternity," the Empress had declared—that's how Peet longed to build.

Peet drew up plans to build a church, and Willy claimed the pulpit.

Peet made the bricks, which horses carted out of Apanlee in wagon after wagon, and Willy counted them and said: "All brick and mortar to God's praise."

When the new chapel stood completed, Willy said, immensely pleased: "A splendid church, and full of pardoned souls but one—"

Peet smiled and slapped the prodding Elder on the shoulder: "Well, for a start, how would you like to marry me? I am claiming a beautiful woman,"

Peet's chosen was a distant cousin who came visiting from Chortitza. Peet knew at once: "A girl to share my spirit." He

saw that Greta was exceptional. She knew how to lengthen the life of a candle, how to shorten the grief of a child. She cooked, scrubbed, swept, washed, knit, and sang like a canary. She dried apples, cherries, pears while stringing pretty chains of peppers. She stone-churned golden slabs of butter with the prettiest, daintiest hands.

As soon as he laid eyes on her, Peet told her, daringly: "Beloved, let us marry just as soon as geese are fat and nights are cool—" His love for her was like a lake without a bottom.

She looked at him and blushed—now what to do with all that happiness except to pluck another chicken for the pot?

"A woman to rise with the sun," the Elder Willy said approvingly, and Peet spoke from the fullness of his heart: "Yes, Apanlee will be a shrine."

Guests poured in from all directions to see the lovely bride. Peet had his prancing horses ribboned, ear to tail. The Elder Willy spoke a somber blessing. His fine-tuned choir sang praise in perfect, four-part harmony.

"A couple straight out of a love song," said the guests, and wiped their eyes. A touching thing, a wedding—it drew tears.

"Good luck, and God's eternal blessings," said Willy.

"The same to you," said Peet, a happy man indeed.

It was a wondrous day, and it was clear to all that these two men, in their respective functions, would manage splendidly to keep the universe from wobbling—Peet corresponding with the tsars, and Willy keeping up the link to the hereafter. The German villages, it was agreed, were in the best of hands—in this life and the next.

But matters festered like a boil when Peet resolved to build a school, for there were many children, all barefoot, all untutored—and more arrived in dusty wagons every day. Peet firmly argued at the council meeting that they must learn to read and write, and to that end, not waiting for an answer, he went away to find a kindly teacher who was, as it turned out, plagued and possessed by a progressive spirit—or so, at least, it seemed to Willy who

sensed before a year had passed that things were getting out of hand. His nervous goiter told him there was trouble—and more to come, unless he put a stop to it, and fast.

"Reading, writing, recitation—" Peet stipulated, but Willy added cautiously: "—but only from the Scriptures!"

"By example rather than by rod," objected Peet, but Willy provided the hickory stick.

With cane in hand, the Elder visited one day, and what he saw, he did not like one bit. "Where is the lecture?" the Elder wanted to know. "Who's paying you for silence?"

"My lecture is being applied. I gave it before you came in," the teacher shrugged, and bit his lower lip.

In turn, the Elder glared. This was an idler, clearly.

The room was far too hot. There was a pail of water with a dipper, and now and then a little one would tiptoe for a drink.

"No discipline?"

"No need for discipline," the teacher said, for all the children sat and scribbled, mutely.

"Say! Is it true that you are fond of modern notions?"

"Modern notions?" asked the teacher, leaning back.

"Do you teach the alphabet forwards and backwards?"

"Whatever for? Straightforward is all they need."

"Do you make them recite the Chapters of Luke?"

A hush fell suddenly. The little boys and girls sat, doing slate work silently.

"No, Elder Willy," the teacher said at length. "With due respect, this is a classroom, not a church."

The Elder watched the children for a while, not knowing what to say, against his will impressed—until he saw just what it was they copied: poetry! A waste! A shame! "Why not, instead, copy a hymn?" That would have been prudent. That would have made sense. Hymns needed practice, anyway, until they lodged in memory.

There was a pause. The teacher had nothing to say.

The Elder, for his part, sat by the window, reflecting in an-

guish, not wanting to seem like a fool by raising an issue he might not be able to see to conclusion. His roving glance fell on an illustrated cover on the teacher's desk, and the boulder deep within turned over in his chest.

"A fairytale!" he all but yelped. "If ever there's a book of lies, this must be it! And left, without the blink of eye, right within reach of trusting little children!"

"There's nothing wrong with fairytales. Myths make a mind grow lush with imagery," the teacher said, his eyes as clear as ice.

The Elder Willy howled: "I didn't ask you for your likes. Or for your views. Did I?"

"I thought I'd offer them to you. To edify your sentiments."

The children ducked. A cannon might have sounded. At long last, the teacher said softly: "—pray let me go on," and the Elder stood tall and said sharply: "You are welcome to leave. This instant. Right now."

And, sucking in his sagging belly, throwing back his mighty mane, he took his cane and, leaving, slammed the door on progress and modernity. He slammed it hard, with all his might. He did not even wait to check on the twenty-six end-of-day Recitation-of-Rules he himself had helped compose. He gave his horse a sharp slap with a hazel switch, thus forcing it into a nervous trot, and took himself straight to the gates of Apanlee to settle an overdue grievance with Peet.

He grabbed Peet Neufeld by the sleeve: "So? Are you satisfied? And do you know what else is going on? All fairy tales are lies!"

Peet laughed and slapped the Elder on the shoulder: "Why worry about unhatched eggs?"

Right then and there, the Elder knew that it was time to strengthen vigil. Give the Devil your pinkie—he'll grab you by both elbows and steer you straight into the pit! One thing would lead to the next. Folk songs. Nicknames. Red dresses with puffed sleeves. Unrestrained laughter on Sundays.

"Let one-armed Penner teach," he demanded. "Why not let the poor cripple be useful? His plow wobbles sadly. A cow on a leash will run havoc with him."

"You can't be serious. He's not equipped to teach. He cannot even read."

"Well, he can learn, and in the meantime—"

"I have heard your complaint," said Peet Neufeld.

"And?"

"We live in the world, and we must understand that world. It is no longer possible to isolate ourselves."

"What kind of talk is this? Whatever do you mean?"

"See here? Look at this box. See all these feeble seedlings? In this small crate there grows a future forest. Withhold the sun and the soil's nourishment from these young roots, and wood will never be as hard and durable as wood is meant to be."

The Elder Willy looked at Peet and sadly shook his head. A bookish man could be as fanciful with thought as the tsars' ballerinas.

Willy brooded hard on ways to remedy the situation at the school without provoking Peet to slacken his donations and blight the work still left to do in the lush vineyards of the Lord. He perspired to find a harmonious solution. But all the while he knew what all the righteous know: uncensored reading leads to unchecked thoughts, more dangerous than bullets.

He knew: temptations spring from books like feathers from a down comforter. Once ripped, you cannot ever put them back. You didn't need a fairy tale to know that right was right, and left was left, and any fool could tell the difference by concentrating on the pounding of his heart.

At last, the Elder could stand it no longer.

He took a key one night and let himself into the classroom. He worked with grim determination into the early morning hours, deciphering laboriously, cutting page after page from great heaps of books, flinging them into the fire he had lit to warm his bunions. When he was finished, there was nothing but shreds at his

feet, nothing but wrath in his bones!

"So there!" he said, and heaved a sigh. "Have we need of the world?"

The teacher found an envelope beneath his door before the villagers could rise, catch notice, and protest. In a swirl of dust, he was gone.

Proud of his victory, the Elder added two lame sisters to his choir.

Peet started skipping devotions.

# Chapter 3

In years to come, Apanlee became a peerless showcase farm.

Peet harvested on double summer fallow, first plowing shallow and then deep. He loosened the soil now this way, then that—harrowing, seeding, watching and learning.

He crossed Dutch and Frisian cattle and gave away their calves. He bred cattle red of color, full of udder, sleek with glossy sheen, so that the women of his village stood enamored, just staring at the splendid beasts.

Peet widened his attic, dug trenches around trees, and planted windbreaks everywhere to stem the force of gale. From Peet, the settlers learned how to improve their wooden latches; their wives and daughters learned the secrets of *vareniki* from Greta.

Peet traded secrets with the Tartars. One sunny afternoon, he came home with a small sack of special seed. From it, by trial and error, experimenting patiently, he grew a stronger type of grain. In the early years of pioneering, seeding, harvesting and threshing still were done by hand, and that was slow, that took too many hours—and time, to Peet, seemed priceless. His bril-

liant sap of genius ran strong, in need of outlet, compelling him to set his teeth against the special needs of time. He could tell how his life, by the hour, diminished—how late it was already, how much yet to be done.

"Time is not hitched to a post," he often said to Greta, the apple of his eye.

"You are carving the future," said she.

There was no end to Peet's inventions. He started drawing wheels and swivels, and soon there stood a brand new outfit in the threshing shed of Apanlee, with every bolt in place and every hinge well-oiled.

"That's progress, Greta. Wealth."

Her eyes met his in loving understanding. He reached for her and, in broad daylight, with all the neighbors looking on, he stroked across her golden hair and watched her cheeks turn red and lush as poppies.

For such a man of force and vision, Greta was the perfect mate. She knit his socks and mittens. Nobody baked zwieback as fluffy as Greta's. Nobody rolled *vareniki* her way.

She drew lava currents from Peet's heart; the midwife soon drew baby after baby from her body. She gave him three sons, one after the other. He, for his part, bestowed on them the names of Emperors: Peter. Alexander. Nicholas.

He stood, his heart ablaze with pride, atop his loaded granaries. With both his hands, he dug into his riches. Such was the bounty of those summers. Such was the dowry of his love.

A man with strength enough to pound an anvil, at night he sat alone, quill twirling in his fingers, sifting through the numbers that summed his success, composing careful letters to the tsars. His study, even then, became a widely whispered legend. The luxuries he owned are mentioned to this day: a desk with an enormous writing surface, a divan of brocade, an open fireplace, a gold ink blotter, sped to him by courtly courier as a special present from the tsars, a fancy box of sealing wax, a window wide enough to give a panoramic view of Apanlee.

A lover of print, Peet Neufeld read many a book to sharpen his judgment, tracing down page after page with sensitive hands, searching for secrets embedded in letters.

"A genius," declared the Crown, and gave Peet land and yet more land to plow and seed and harvest.

"A man who hears out any serf in any tongue," the Russian peasants said, to whom he brought the alphabet for those who longed to read.

It was a trying time for Willy—how to keep his tongue in check, yet prudent counsel handy without imperiling Peet's generous donations to the church.

Willy drew his knowledge solely from the proddings of the Holy Spirit. He watched Peet's ruminative fervor with ambivalence and worry. He who delved deep, not into mysteries of growth and progress but rather into shameful scandals in the lives of erring souls, saw danger in Peet's path.

Not to be outdone by Peet, the Elder Willy kept on widening his influence and strengthening his mark. The Lord kept adding to his flock, for babies came from everywhere, filling cradle after cradle. They still arrived in dusty covered wagons. Fat midwives fished them from a well. Storks dropped them through the chimneys from the gables. A fairy put them, swaddled head to toe, beneath the Christmas trees.

The Elder Willy smiled with glee. His sway solidified, as did his Sunday sermons.

Willy, too, was married. Thrice. He lived three-score-and-ten, and as the Bible promised, the Lord gave him his share. Between three wives and a long life, he had more sons and daughters than he could comfortably count—not that he didn't try.

His first wife, Margarete, bore seven, but three did not survive their infancy. One son, regrettably, was mad. Then Margarete passed on; Willy married her sister, Maria, a widow with five children of her own. The middle one, whose name was Anne Elizabeth, had been already nicknamed carelessly, and people called her Lizzy. He did his best, posthaste, to point out the

anomaly.

Maria would have none of it:

"It's Lizzy," said Maria, heaving, for she was fat and always out of breath. "Say what you will. It's Lizzy."

Maria was the envy of the neighborhood, although the midwife fretted. She sat on double chairs and alternated feet so as to balance weight. Not normally defiant, Maria turned skittish soon after, for she was expecting again. She leaned her elbows on the sill at intermittent intervals to study passersby.

"Let her have just a little bit of vanity," she said. "What harm can come of that?"

He did not argue back; she had a bloated belly. He knew she was excitable. For quite a while, he kept the little girl within his sight, watching warily out of the corner of his eye.

But not for long; he realized to his relief that he could trust this child. Where Lizzy walked, the violets nodded. She was a smiling, friendly youngster, born around 1844. She had a sweet, accommodating nature; she hardly ever cried.

Matilda, his third wife, was twenty years younger than Willy and therefore outlived him by many a year and several additional children, thus adding to a crowded household already nebulous with kin. But all that happened later. For now, Matilda still sang in somebody else's choir; he hardly noticed her. He was still married to Maria when, suddenly, misfortune struck and she succumbed in shrieking terror when Willy's Sunday horse stepped on a twig, reared unexpectedly, and kicked her in her belly.

Sadly, Maria died. Her son was born, regardless

Little Lizzy, barely six years old, was not yet practiced well enough to iron Willy's Sunday trousers to a truly royal sheen in honor of the tearful funeral, but she was old enough to baby-sit, as it turned out, for Willy tossed the newborn enterprisingly into her lap and told her curtly: "He's yours. His name is Claas. You watch him at all times."

Thus, Lizzy learned mothering early.

Across his second wife's grave, Willy expertly spotted his third.

Matilda was a providential choice, with a low forehead and a curious light in her watery, wide-open eyes. He looked her over carefully. He knew that she was made for him.

Matilda had a pointed tongue, useful in helping him minister to people slipping from the path prescribed by tradition and Scriptures. He liked that very much. She hailed from a village where revivals were strong while untoward laughter was scarce. He liked that even more. Her short and stubby fingers could milk the fattest goat. He liked that best of all.

Willy showed her every corner of his house. He led her to the well along the path his grieving orphaned boys and girls had raked into a fancy pattern to show obedience. He told Matilda: "Here's the barn. Here is the chicken house. Here is the summer kitchen."

He took her to the parlor where all the offspring sat, lined up along a bench like sparrows on a fence. He said to them: "She is your mother now."

They stared at her and hung their heads in memory of their departed mother. Matilda sat on a chair and said nothing.

He knew that he had chosen well when, early the next morning, he heard Matilda sweeping through the house with broom and feather duster, scolding the children heartily. They scattered to their duties as they should.

Born the year that saw the flies come out in flocks, Claas Epp was from the start a sorely troubled youngster, a child with a cleft in his soul.

His first breath turned his mother's face to ashes. Even at birth, his forehead was knotted with anguish. His head was too large. His bones were too soft. The midwife took one look at him and said to Willy Epp: "Why bother?"

The Russian peasants cried: "Let's call a priest and christen him before it is too late." Against the greatest odds, explicit prayers pulled him through. Somehow, Claas managed to survive.

"It looks as if he'll live," Matilda said to Willy. She had no time for him; she, too, was glad for Lizzy's dimpled arms and turned to other chores.

Before too long, Claas stood up on wobbly knees. He suffered from repeated hiccups. That he formed words at all was seen as a decided miracle. His speech was as disorderly as grounds left in a coffee pot.

He had a mind as violent as a September storm, excitable and anguished long before he left the cradle. As he grew up, he took great pains to hide his hands, his eyes and his thoughts. The only remedy that seemed to help and calm his ragged nerves was the balm of the Good Word. He took up preaching early.

One of the first of three more children born to Willy and Matilda was a girl named Noralee. In contrast to Claas, Noralee grew as a weed grows, as rapidly as her surroundings permitted.

She was a useful, level-headed child, soon helping Lizzy soothe the wild gaze in one of her half-brothers' eyes.

"You! Do not look at me like that!" Matilda yelled at times, made fretful by the chores that came with a household of too many children and too little space for herself. "It's not as if I have two heads."

Claas tucked his head between his shoulder blades. He was odd in his infancy and would grow odder still.

This mattered not to Noralee. She loved Claas well enough in small and peevish ways, though it would never do to show affection openly. She lunged to pull his hair to cover up her feelings. He hid, shivering, under her bed, remaining there all afternoon, curled up and shaking badly. No matter how Matilda tried to poke him back into the sunlight with her broom, he huddled in the dark.

"Odd as a Buddha's tooth," Matilda said to Willy.

"What do you mean by that?"

"He slaps himself, day-in, day-out. He acts as if he's sitting on a bee. And on the coldest day, he's wet with perspiration."

"Just grab him by both earlobes," said Willy to his wife. "As

soon as I find time, I'll cure him with some private talks."

"You will?"

"I will. If all else fails, a handful of gray salt."

"Salt?"

"Salt. You heard me. Salt. Salt cures most any itch."

With a sly look, he gazed at young Matilda.

"Why, poison ivy on your thoughts!"

He took his hat. He put it on just so. He even pushed it down his ears a little, at a sassy angle, before he took himself into a slipshod village where modernism tried to grow—where he tried hard to forestall drinking, dancing, dominoes and general buffoonery.

All that took place while Peet and Greta still reigned at Apanlee. You would have thought life lay before them like a meadow, so happy were those two.

When visitors arrived, they paused in awe and wonder at the gates of Apanlee: "Just look how blessedly the Germans live—"

Perfection blossomed everywhere. There was no end to wonderment. Large mulberry trees led up to a generous entrance and stairway. To the left and right lay three straight rows of flower beds, filled board to board with roses, marigolds and pansies. To the back of the main house stretched an expansive orchard, its branches bent with fruit, replete with scratching hens and roosters, hissing geese and quacking ducks.

So much wealth! So many riches!

Along the walls of the front hall hung an impressive row of portraits of the Romanovs. Sun rays caught themselves in polished floors and in imported mirrors as well as in the silver sheen of samovars that kept on humming day and night so as to offer tea to countless guests who kept arriving at the gates. Rose jam for nobles and Tartars alike! Ironed lace on Greta Neufeld's pillows! Windows buffed to brilliance with a special cotton cloth! Curtains starched with snow-white flour!

Enormous brick stoves everywhere in winter—all spreading warmth and comfort to the farthest corner of the mansion, no

matter how the Russian night might shudder, how loud the steppe winds kept howling through the stiffened orchards in the night. A clock of solemn chimes and heavy weights, brought all the way from the Vistula plains, sat in a corner and kept ticking. Peet wound it every morning with an enormous ornamental key.

"Time is not hitched to a post," he would say with that faraway look in his eyes.

"That's right," said Willy, never one to miss an opportunity to press a timely point, and added cautiously: "Abhorred of God is anyone who loves geometry—"

He was returning from a funeral where he had delivered an uplifting sermon and had received a strengthening meal. "Peet, don't you think it's time at last to re-aquaint yourself with the Good Lord?"

"We aren't strangers, Willy," said Peet with confidence. He smiled contentedly. There was warmth in his belly, good will in his heart. He gloried in his sheaves, lined up as if with rulers.

They bantered often, back and forth, in wary understanding of each other. Each heard the pounding of the stone that whet the scythe as if it were the bells of Jericho.

Peet bought up land and yet more land. The church did likewise, not to be outdone.

The end result was many spin-off daughter colonies. The settlers all bought soil as if there might come shortages tomorrow. Rows of neat homes emerged like carrot seeds that started sprouting caps.

How different a way of life was this compared to life in Russian huts where poverty and ignorance stared out of blinded windows.

When snow lay thick and there was leisure, Peet would go visiting to prod the Russian populace. "Why that foul pig beneath the oven bench? Why bedbugs in those ridges?"

The serfs would listen most attentively, with their backs against a mud stove and frozen feet against a calf. Not one of them would anger at his chiding. They liked him much; they let

him plead with them on lazy winter days to wash their beards with kerosene to rid themselves of lice.

"A saint," was the verdict. Both serfs and peasants showed respect. "With a handshake like a thunderclap. A man to be judged by his friends. A teacher worthy of our imitation. And not a kopeck does he owe to anyone—"

Talented and venturesome and prosperous already well beyond the needs of mortal men, Peet kept on adding rubles to his coffers. While others still wove linen, he specialized in silk. He bred a special breed of sheep, whose wool and juicy cuts of lamb he sold to noble families whom he would often go to visit while traveling first rate, a bear skin cover tucked around his knees.

He told colorful stories to Greta of life in the City of Peter and Paul. She never tired learning of how princelings lived and how the Cossacks drew their sabers. "Men drink their tea from glasses," said Greta to Matilda, "and women use small cups—"

"With Greta's honey," Matilda told her jealous neighbors. The neighbors stared, struck dumb.

"That's vanity," her husband said.

Matilda rolled her eyes. She echoed all his thoughts.

The years revealed that Willy was a perfect branch off the pious tree. No different than his father, he visited the sick, married young love, baptized the willing, buried the dead—and still had energy enough to track down erring souls. For his work, he took a modest fee—seven kopecks for a wedding, twice as much for birth and death.

Peet, in turn, recorded all village statistics—keeping charts and graphs and figures of how fast the settlements grew. There was a goose at Apanlee, kept pampered for this very purpose—to yield the quills that Peet kept wearing out.

"I'll see you in church? Next Sunday, Peet Neufeld? A day to thank God for your myriad goods—?"

"Oh, Willy. Please. Just leave me be."

"You know that too much human aspiration is a sin. It says

so in the Bible."

It was not easy work, the Elder knew, to censor sinners, impose penalties, bring down the haughty, reprimand the lax. "Just give the Holy Ghost a chance. Just think about it. Will you?"

"Your sermons, Willy, just do not reach my heart."

"I'll lengthen them. With singing. Come Sunday, I'll be preaching on the parable of the Red Sea—"

Peet was a man with an abiding patience. "Let me correct one small misunderstanding, now that you mention it. The Red Sea isn't red."

"It's red," said Willy firmly. "The Lord makes no mistakes."

Let no one laugh at him—he had his own defenses. He aimed many a tailor-made sermon at Peet, hinting broadly of the camel and the needle's eye of which the Gospel spoke.

Peet had become a very wealthy man. His stables grew. His borders widened. He had so much money his kopecks tore holes in his trousers—hence vainly embroidered suspenders of late!

To spy on Greta was Matilda's practiced specialty. Nothing escaped the stab of her eyes. The lash of her tongue was amazing.

One sunny Easter morning, Matilda's jaw dropped to her collarbone. Parked by the gates of Apanlee stood—what? Did she see right? A scarlet livery with silken yellow tassels!

"The tsarevich!"

With a thud, her wooden sandals flew into a corner. "Good gracious Lord," Matilda all but yelped, and ran along the village road on barefoot soles to spread the message far and wide: "A princeling has arrived to drink a cup of tea at Apanlee—"

Windows flew open. Children climbed fences. Peasants everywhere knelt in the dust as though felled by a powerful blow. Assorted serfs held up their progeny.

Bless them, our little ones! Such honor! Such indulgence! Bless us, our little father!

"Thousands of acres," Peet told the royal guest who stretched

his weary legs. "Eight thousand sheep. Four hundred horses. Large herds of cross-bred cattle—"

"How many villages?"

Peet spread a hand-drawn map. His heart grew soft with pride. "More than five dozen German towns. See here? That's where it all began. Here's Halbstadt. And here's Chortitza." Once a bald, dry, desolate steppe—now town after town after town! Gnadenfeld. Field of Grace. Lichtenau. Meadow's Light. Rosenort. Place of Roses. "Since the peasants trip over our names, each village is given a number—"

"I call that Prussian thoroughness—" the princeling said and smiled.

"We sweep the streets. We punish sloth. We have the means, collectively, to put a wayward fire out. And in the very middle of each village, a place of honor is accorded our dead—"

"What's next?"

"An orphan's bank. A home for the old and weary."

"A man with an eye for the future?"

"We are links in a chain," Peet replied.

The wind carried songs. The apple blossoms scattered. A man could swing his scythe all day and barely make a dent.

"What is your key?" the princeling asked. "What is the secret, pray?"

"I'll tell you," Peet replied, eyes crinkling with his pride. "My people all rise early. My people plow the dew."

He knew: year after year, the soil would yield rich grain. More and more land would be broken and seeded. The sheaves would fall in golden swaths. Prosperity would widen homes and sharpen plows and bring another crop of healthy, blue-eyed children. Year after year, his silent, sturdy progeny would carve a larger kingdom from the land.

"My children," said Peet Neufeld, "will carve a pathway to the stars. Through hard work. Diligence. Thrift. Application. Competition. Science."

"No excuses for sniffles and toothaches?"

"None. Take my word for it."

And Greta took the princeling shyly by the sleeve to give a happy woman's point of view:

"—a modern butter churn. A coffee grinder. An automatic candle snuffer. Five matching iron kettles. A wooden kneading trough—" and, blushing crimson, next: "—a charcoal warmer for my feet—"

"I am in awe," the royal guest declared and sipped his steaming tea. "Are those real fireflies, Peet Neufeld, that keep on dancing in your eyes?"

His beard trimmed to a perfect angle, Peet smiled right back into the kindly eyes, a daring and progressive man and unafraid to brace his heart with words: "This time, a daughter, so we hope. We have three sons already."

For dinner, they ate Greta's noodle soup and chicken meat with zwieback.

"Subjects any country would be proud to call its own," the princeling said before he climbed up on his carriage to depart. "We of the House of Romanov are very proud of you."

"We honor you with all our hearts."

"The House of Romanov will stand behind you like a mountain."

"We have two masters only. The Lord above. And you."

"Peet Neufeld, see that sun? As long as it hangs in the sky, we of the House of Romanov vouch for protection. Always."

Peet said: "I'll sleep on that."

With words gleaned from his Prussian nanny, the tsarevich shook hands with Peet before the princely entourage disappeared around the corner in a steady, even trot. The children waved until the distance blurred the horses and the strong steppe wind diffused the sounds of rolling wheels.

Peet noted in his diary that night: "For now and all eternity we're guaranteed self-rule."

That's what the princeling said. He said: *"Ich wünsch Euch wohl—"* In gratitude, Peet founded yet another Aryan town and called it Alexanderwohl.

# Chapter 4

As Noralee grew up and into early womanhood, she learned to bend the rules to suit her robust nature.

Not that she lacked good will. She did not mind to stand corrected; she, too, bent gladly to other folks' superior knowledge, much as a willow bends to wind—but she would make a flying leap away, this long before she had good cause, whenever a chastising Elder appeared.

Through her mother, Matilda, nee Friesen, Noralee derived from sturdy but non-descript stock. Face to feet, that's how the Friesens slept, and at right angles to the window, to take advantage of the earthy smell that wafted from the fields. That's why they were as numerous, as common and as brash as buttercups in meadows—quite unlike Lizzy, who nestled her face in the crook of her arm, who would have fainted, too, had she not been too scared to faint the moment a stranger appeared.

Noralee was known for bold and hardy ways; she could not be dismayed. Fat arms akimbo, that's how she handled life.

Lizzy, by contrast—as fluid as water. You touched her, and

she started rippling, all eager to adjust.

"All right! All right!" wailed Noralee when scolded for a child's trespasses, and then forgot her promises. She missed no opportunity; she dove for Claas, guns blazing:

"Asleep again?" shrieked Noralee. "Claas? Claas? Asleep again? Will you be found asleep when the Lord's trumpets blow?" She had a voice that carried far.

"Sleep helps him calm his headaches," begged Lizzy, and stroked her brother's sweaty brow. She mediated constantly. "Noralee, now leave him be! Will you please leave him be?"

"Wake up! Wake up! Wake up and watch the lightning!"

"He is afraid," begged Lizzy, while cringing at such cruelty. It was her chore for many years to keep his tormentors at bay.

While every other healthy child would revel in the riches of the harvest, Claas Epp would sit behind the barns of Apanlee, shivering and sneezing, wailing that the itch of wheat beards did him in. Napping was Claas's favorite pastime long before he grew into long trousers.

Peet, watching from the window, told Greta, yielding to disquiet: "That child is ill of spirit."

"He makes himself an easy target. Somebody always shoves him from behind to coax that eerie whine."

"Yes. You're right. He's different. He's odd."

Both watched the boy with worry as he leaned helplessly against a tree, his throbbing temples cradled in both hands, as he listened to the wind that sat in the Apanlee mulberry trees, howling in a low and mournful voice.

"He's shivering as though he's lying in a grave," said Greta, addled greatly. "And yet he laughs; he can't stop laughing. Whatever might it be?"

Nobody had an answer.

The herbalists were flustered. The midwife hid herself. Three bonesetters, consulted as a last resort, predicted to a voice: "There's trouble brewing somewhere. His fingernails are blue."

Matilda had her hands full with the skittish boy. She marshaled

her home antidotes. She rummaged thoroughly among the row of labeled bottles on her shelves, mix-matching this and that.

"Try this," she said. "Try that." She punctured both his nostrils. She pricked a blister with a needle she dunked in honey first.

It made no difference. Nothing did. Claas's headaches only worsened.

She decided a kitten might help. She put it in a basket and handed it to him: "Be sure to feed it every day. And keep its milk dish clean."

"I will," Claas promised her with lowered lashes, but it died from his fervent caresses.

And then there was The Voice. The Voice hissed in his ears. It gave him arguments. It told him he must seek out sinners to convince them of the errors of their ways—this long before he grew a set of proper preacher's whiskers.

Of all the weird afflictions that plagued this boy possessed by evil spirits, the thunderstorms of muggy summers were the worst, when lightning flashed within his overheated mind.

"Let us ask God for mercy for all sinners! Mercy! Mercy! For all sinners!"

He jumped at every thunderclap, and Noralee, who relished drama from the cradle, kept jumping, too, this for good measure, thus helping Claas holler for Jesus. She did not mind a relative who was already practicing his sermons on the rabbits.

Not so young Lizzy, though. Had she known how to seal Claas's ears with beeswax to keep The Voice away, she, Lizzy, would have tried.

In a blind surge of love she summoned every counter-argument she knew to make Claas see that lightning never struck the righteous. But even she knew early: there was no way to keep The Voice from Claas.

The little boy heard something dreadful yet compelling within the rolling sounds. When thunder started tormenting his sparking brain, he would dash through the streets and leap-frog,

unconstrained, into the nearest cellar.

All was not well. Even his pets behaved as though he made them drunk and spooked.

"Where's Claas," Matilda kept after Lizzy. "Are you watching your brother? Where is he? Have you paid attention to him?"

"I locked him in the barn. Along with three pieces of sugar."

"Be sure to check."

"I threw the chain. No way can he get out," explained Lizzy, who was willing to lavish attention, but Claas did not invite attention; no matter what she tried to do, the recalcitrant youngster sucked in his breath and strained backwards.

Matilda took her worries to her husband. "What might be the solution?"

The Elder took his prayers to the Lord who told him he should tell his wife that she should try to counteract her step-son's maladies with salted cucumbers.

"I'll watch him," offered Noralee. "I'll watch him twice as hard. I'll watch him through the keyhole."

The day the Gypsies arrived, he escaped. A loose nail in the board, an unlatched side door, the lure of the forbidden, whichever it was—before Matilda looked up from her washboard, the child with the wild eyes was up and was gone! Astute neighbors spotted him gingerly putting one toe in front of the other, and—just in the nick of time!—snatched him away from witchery.

"Claas! The rooster should get you and shred you!" scolded Matilda.

"Suck on a watermelon rind!" the Elder Willy cried.

"A jealous spider stung him," wailed sundry herbalists. "Ah, yes. That must be it."

Matilda, who was hoping against hope she might lose her troubling stepson to measles, knew then there would be no relief. The household was crowded already with too many children, and she was expecting again.

"Foreshadowing again?" asked Greta archly, too.

No matter what her vigilance, her bread knife disappeared. Her knitting came unraveled. Her flower pots turned upside down.

It stared her in the face; she could not help her feelings.

She did not like the child. His eyebrows arched unevenly. Thin hair grew on his fingers. She watched him stray about the halls of Apanlee and frighten cats and dogs.

She took her worries to her oldest son, on whose advice she leaned. They were of like mind in most matters.

"He acts just a water beetle," she said to Alexander. "The way his mind keeps darting to the surface for some air, then bottoming again—"

Her son was proud to be a marginal believer. "When he was born, the moon might have emitted strange rays."

He might as well have spoken in Kirghize. Consensus rapidly solidified. Claas was in trouble from the start, like mildew wafting from a hole.

Before long, Claas was speaking in several tongues.

His sister, Lizzy, tried to shush him, terrified. She held him by both hands, to help his eyes to focus.

"Hush! Hush!" cried Lizzy, overcome. She cherished charity within her heart for anything or anybody small enough to curl up in her lap, yet when it came to Claas, she found her patience running thin. Something deep in this troubled child cried out for mothering and soothing, but what that was she was too young to know.

She felt that she was fighting gravity on stilts: tears welling in her eyes, she dared not delve too deeply. The little boy called forth in her raw feelings she did not like and tried her best to quell.

She tried to soothe him with a heated brick against his aching belly, but when she reached for him, he arched and pushed back, hard.

Odd as a Buddha's tooth.

"Odd as a Buddha's tooth," the neighbors passed the chant.

"That one will grow to be a vagrant," predicted every herbalist the family consulted.

"Or worse," said Willy from the door. "He might become a Lutheran."

"Oh, anything but that!" cried Lizzy, mortified.

Young Lizzy often visited at Apanlee to fortify herself with common sense when overwhelmed by prophesy and being prodded to perfection, the fare in her stepfather's house. She was a softly rounded youngster, warm, appetizing, fragrant like zwieback dough, with not a single pimple. She lived on a mysterious inner warmth.

She, too, came from an earnest peasant clan maternally, all liberally sprinkled with freckles. On both her father's and her mother's side, she was entwined with the more bounteous Harders, Friesens, Wiebes—a breed of stoic, somber farmers, attuned to the needs of the earth.

While visiting at Apanlee, young Lizzy cheered herself with sips of Greta's tea.

She spoke up in a timid voice. "I'd rather be here than at home." She knew she was deserving to be chastised and flooded herself with her shame.

Greta opted for Christian mercy. A troubled relative, no matter what the urgency, was certainly no pleasure to behold.

"Let me speak freely, Lizzy. You ask: what ails your little brother? Nobody seems to know. There is no point in speculating. Just stay away from him."

Young Lizzy hung her flaxen head. She, too, wished for a rosy brother; she hurt on Claas's behalf. His speech was slurred and blurred. He was the butt of everybody's jokes.

She knew he focused his veiled eyes on his surroundings and read a strong revulsion. If anyone as much as looked at Claas askew, blood bubbled from his nose.

The neighbors watched with anxious, knowing eyes. Was it too late to counteract the spell? To this day, many people think the Gypsies were at fault.

In early spring, small bands of Gypsies pitched their tents and caused vexation in the German villages. Dogs sneezed and couldn't stop. Cows yielded bloody milk. Roosters lapsed into silence, and ganders showed no interest in geese.

The churches stood aggrieved. Soon, there were loud complaints from everywhere. Who was at fault? The deacons huddled daily.

"Misfortune," warned the Elder Willy, "will strike abundantly."

He opened his mouth to say more, but no strengthening sermon came forth. The air reeked of decay. With scraggly, windblown wings, the village stork sat hunched atop his gable, nursing a badly broken beak.

The vagrants' chants, their heathen songs and spicy smells and mesmerizing thimbles cast wicked spells on any man or beast. A poisonous light tinged the horizon. Sleep evaded the Elder at night. He tossed and turned and tried to throw off feelings of foreboding. He was convinced the heathen Gypsy band had cast the evil eye.

Take now: he gave the pitch of a song, and it did not catch. He cleared his throat and muttered hoarsely: "Lot's descendants have arrived—"

The congregation ducked. In a matter as fearsome as this, they took his word on Faith. They knew they could trust his opinion.

"Let us now bow our heads and pray—"

"The Devil's kin!" That's what the Elder thundered. The congregation paid attention sluggishly.

The Gypsies all had burning eyes and raven hair. They spoke a language no one understood and no one cared to try.

They studied stars and predicted disaster. They put forth foul scents; they nodded to hail; they sat in hordes along the embankment within the shelter belt of the Apanlee mulberry trees, waiting for mischief to happen.

No fences, no prayers, no snarling dogs kept them away.

The Elder Willy fought the heathen with a vengeance. He dogged them hard, with knives in his lungs; they were quicker, more cunning, than he.

By the time he arrived with a broom or a shoemaker's knee strap, they had already grazed an unsuspecting village—clothespins stolen, dreams dissected, fortunes told and even worse. Behind his back, to spite him, they spread their wares to trade in miracles and cures.

Lilac tea for stomach aches.

Goose grease for a broken smile.

Amulets against the treacheries of love.

No matter how the Elder tongue-lashed, no matter how he prayed high in his attic, on his knees, beseeching God to cleanse the German streets and make the Gypsies leave, they stayed, a noisy nuisance, predictable and slatternly as April sparrows.

One Gypsy tossed a lizard backwards and proclaimed: "I see a shadow where no shadow should be—"

That was a potent hex. A light, gray mist hung low.

It would take many prayers and lavish offerings to Willy's special Orphan Fund until it wore away.

It might have helped speed matters, produced an antidote against the darker powers of the Fiend if those from Apanlee with all their influence, their might and moneyed pockets had deigned to join the praying congregation.

But no. Peet Neufeld only pulled the Good Book from his shelf to point a righteous finger: "In my father's house are many mansions. In God's garden we find many different fruits—"

"I take my bearings from the Holy Spirit," argued Willy.

Peet spoke, an open disbeliever: "A shadow does not make a mountain."

"Some may think that," said the Elder. "And others, Peet, do not."

Peet's glance stopped further arguments, so Willy took his hat and shook his head and left.

Peet's serfs were busy harrowing. The soil had thawed out early. Daisies popped up everywhere. Acacia trees exploded into clouds of snowy clusters, and insects crawled into the hearts of blooms with spindly legs to suck the honeyed dew.

Soon, workers turned the cut grass over to free the scent of earth and sun, and little girls and boys would stand and wait for Peet until he scooped them up and hoisted them atop the ladder wagons that slowly rolled the fodder for his mares into the stalls of Apanlee before the thunders came.

"All right now! Lizzy! Claas! Stop shrieking, Noralee!"

He liked to swing the squealing children, one by one, by their strong arms and legs atop the pile of hay that shook, collapsing, burying their laughter. The earth's smell, fresh and pungent, lodged sweetly in Peet's nostrils and dizzied him a bit.

Anticipating fatherhood and, therefore, of a mellow mood, Peet touched it gently with his fingertips to feel its fragrant warmth. His head swam with his happiness and with the feel of coming harvests. He grabbed a pitchfork eagerly to help disperse the dung—he knew it was a year so good, so rich and right, that the black soil would yield its gold straight out of fairyland.

A fortnight after, to Greta and Peet their last child, a daughter, was born. By then, Peet's beard was woven through with silver, and Greta, it was noted, looked perplexed. They were no longer young; the pregnancy was a surprise, although those two were intertwined as though they were Adam and Eve. Fat smoke kept billowing from Apanlee's twelve chimneys as if to advertise the ancient laws of love.

Matilda doubled as a midwife. While waiting for the baby to be born, she kept on fishing for her *schlorren* and rolling up her sleeves. Matilda could sense it; in fact, she could tell: it was there, the awaited misfortune—like the lapping of water under an oar.

"It might be twins," said Peet. Matilda held her breath. She knew: when a man is afraid in his heart, he sees double.

Greta, meanwhile, took soothing walks among her stately trees. Often, Peet would watch her from afar, still shy before the miracle, and feed Claas Epp sweet lumps of sugar from his pockets to calm his sparking brain.

Peet had gone out into the fields to check the serfs who stacked the shocks of grain when labor pangs began in earnest to hammer Greta's spine. He could tell the birthing had begun when he saw the Elder Willy, white of face and stiff with fear, wave his arms at him.

He brought his plow to a sharp, sudden halt. He ran, cutting through meadows and orchards, flinging himself across fences, on the steps of Apanlee all but colliding with Matilda.

"It's time? It's not too late?"

Matilda shushed him curtly. Matilda slammed the door. Her face was taut and hard.

For quite a while, Peet stood in the hallway, waiting. He looked like a horse that was thrown on its side. He sat, alone, by the cistern. All afternoon. Waiting. Matilda sat judgmentally and frowning at the end of Greta's bed.

To aid in the difficult birth, the servants threw open all windows.

That night, Peet ate a meal in silence. It took too long. It was too hard. He wiped a sweaty brow. The infant was his; he never knew humility; the archives point that out. He had three sons; his heart yearned for a daughter. He had resolved to name her Katharina, in honor of the settlers' royal benefactress—long dead and gone but still remembered with much love.

Matilda lit three extra lamps. She poured water from a kettle. She put a match to the straw in the hearth.

In the end, a mite of a girl-child came forth.

"A stem too weak to hold that wobbling head," Matilda said to Peet. Claas, hanging on Matilda's skirts, sucked in his breath through his teeth.

Peet inspected the newborn, mist in his eyes and lead in his

soul. He spread his hand for measurement—the infant reached from thumb to little finger. He held the stirring thing within his callused palm and for some dark and brooding reason withheld the royal name. Instead, he named her Olga.

Why Olga? Had Peet lost his mind?

Not a soul within sight who approved!

The German Bible and the German-friendly Romanovs provided ample choices—or why not make a spinster happy, or an aunt? Why challenge fate? Why not be modest and obedient? Did Peet not understand the hidden warning—that, in the end, the good Lord always evened up a score?

"She will not live," announced Matilda, and blew the tears from her red nose.

Peet said: "She will. She must!" Peet looked, Matilda later told her husband, shivering, just like an animal that growled and bared its fangs.

"I read between the lines," said Willy, who went gospeling.

Peet turned on him in such a rage that Willy backed away: "All right. All right. So what if she lives? So what if she dies?"

Peet stared at him with palpable dislike. "She'll live," he said again.

Olga lived, for Peet imported foreign doctors. Greta wept and wrung her hands. The Elders watched and prayed.

The servants kept the newborn in a drawer, beseeching their icons, putting heated bricks around her tiny limbs to give her added warmth. The herbalists sliced onions near her eyes to make her weep and help her gain her hold on life's assorted sorrows. They wrapped worn socks around her throat to help her ease her grasp of air. They put cobwebs on her forehead; they sprinkled holy water on her scalp. All seemed in vain; she almost died; she might as well have died.

One wintry afternoon, the tiny life convulsed. Limp and listless, it lay afterwards in its richly tasseled cradle. The rudest Catholics took off their hats to cross themselves in fear.

# Chapter 5

A dreadful thing had happened to Peet's little girl who bore a worldly name. The next few years revealed: she could not hear; she could not speak.

"She will not live," wept Greta.

Peet said again: "She will. She must."

"Poor child," Matilda mourned. "If she survives at all, what might be waiting for her?" All night long, candles flickered. The servants were mingling their tears.

Peet's hair turned white with worry: he watched the moon cast crooked rays across his daughter's anguished face as she lay limp within her pillows, worn with her twitchings, transparent and wan. He, who in olden days had never spoken caustically to any man or animal, now walked around in search of faults, in search of sloth and thievery, swinging a stick to mete out swift justice as he alone saw fit. Whereas in by-gone days he might have searched for patient words for anyone in any language, now he no longer answered twice. His servants saw him lean against a plow and struggle for composure.

"All that while in the lap of plenty," the loyal servants said,

adorning their saints with additional glitter on behalf of the whimpering baby. They fed it sour cream and sugared tea to put some dimples on its body, but even that was difficult. Matilda predicted the worst. Peet, yielding to his stubborn streak, kept trying this and that.

Lizzy, in her gentle ways, came up with a solution. She walked up to the silent child one sunny afternoon and told her simply: "Here. Just take my hand."

The deaf-mute reached for her, and Lizzy smiled and added: "I'll lend you the use of my tongue."

Hence, Lizzy spent much time at Apanlee with Olga and her brothers. Although she would not have admitted it, not even to herself, she much preferred the scented child as company to Claas's. There hung about this little girl the fragrant smell of honey that Greta now lavished on her.

At first, the silent youngster seemed oblivious to what had chanced on her. She skipped along the neighbor path like any other child, making friends in time not just with Lizzy and her siblings but other young folk of her age.

Only, they in sturdy wooden sandals—she in tiny pointed shoes.

They in heavy woven skirts and trousers—she in a delicate rustle of crocheted lace.

They with chitchat, song and laughter. She in thoughtful silence, always. Growing deeper with the years.

"No grass will grow beneath her feet," the servants told each other. The serfs drew the sign of the cross at her sight.

With practiced patience, Willy looked for prayer loopholes, letting the Gospel fall open to where it was written: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked. For whatever a man soweth, that he will also reap." Not that it made much difference, for offering the Gospel's balm to Peet was pouring mercury on glass.

"Though Jesus shed his blood for any sinner," said Willy to Matilda, "Peet just won't let himself be saved."

"Remember that the girl was born the year the Gypsies tossed

a lizard backwards," sighed Matilda.

"A year like any other year," said Peet, a stubborn man, disdaining any possible surrender. "It's not the Gypsies' fault. It isn't anybody's fault if nature goes awry."

"It's our Savior's finger, and pointing straight at you."

But Peet was Peet. His skull was thick. The hurt sat deep. An old scar on his cheek flared hotly.

"—a princely child. A diamond. The Emperor of Russia might well have bounced her on his knees—"

"Your spirit, thornier than a rosebush," the Elder Willy pointed out. "If you would only pray—"

"Prayer," said Peet Neufeld coldly, "is just like sailing over dry and barren land."

The Elder Willy Epp sermonized to iron and to stone. Peet shunned all Christian comfort: mid-week devotions, the kiss of peace, foot washing for the sake of harmony to bind the villages together. God's wrath had struck down Apanlee at last.

Claas's tantrums cast sharp shadows. Even his sister Noralee, as sturdy as they came, a child who would have faced the Antichrist bare-handed, kept Claas away with her ear-splitting shrieks.

Lizzy wept many a frustrated tear, quaking at the sight of cruelty, when she discovered that her brother tormented the muted child much as a cat might bait a birdling.

Claas teased and tickled Olga until she shrank in tears into the shadows, refusing to come out.

One morning Greta told the boy: "Now leave. That's it. And don't come back tomorrow."

Willy gave Claas a brisk lashing. "For your sins," he told the boy. "Now ask the Lord to let you start a brand new ledger."

Claas fell into an eery laughter; on the heels of that laughter, he broke into tears.

"My sins," he said to Lizzy sobbingly that night, "have a peculiar smell."

Lizzy's eyes filled up with ready tears. "I'll help you scrub,"

she promised.

She took him to the waterhole to wash away the odor. He slipped and fell, head-first. In panic, Lizzy reached for him to put him on his feet—and found his teeth embedded in her wrist.

At midpoint in the nineteenth century a Jew of German origin holed up within an English tenement to write a big, fat tome about the have-nots and the haves. A quarter century would come and pass before the German pacifists—who had come eagerly to the Ukraine to sow the grain and build the Kingdom for the Lord—were forced to take their *Wanderstab* again in search of peace and land, and would end up in Kansas.

Yet fifty years would pass before a female firebrand named Carrie Nation would sweep her caravan through Wichita and one of Claas's offspring, Josephine, would swing the rebel's torch.

No one could have known then.

The benchmarks stayed simple as the shadows grew long: life took them from autumn to autumn.

Each year, there came persistent mists at first, then came the plodding rains that brought the angry winds. Nobody paid attention.

As children do, they played at hide-and-seek within the stooks of grain that stood like little huts about the fields of Apanlee. If there was gloom among the serfs—or famine, illness, misery outside the gates of Apanlee and its devout surroundings—that fell beyond their scope; they were not bred to question.

Such were the early childhood days of Lizzy, Olga, Claas and Noralee.

They were still young enough, those four, for scrubbing, one by one, each Saturday in the communal tub—still small enough so that their foot soles didn't touch the floor as they sat in their church pews, enveloped in the ancient prophecies.

They were of a sufficient age, but only barely, to feel grief swell their little hearts until they thought that they would suffocate when, without warning, suddenly, Peet Neufeld passed away.

Peet Neufeld was felled by the Lord as if cut from this earth by the blade of his very own scythe.

Here's how that came to pass.

One drowsy summer afternoon, Greta stood on her porch to supervise the serfs who packed cold meat, boiled eggs, a jar of sour cream, a couple of pieces of bacon.

"Be sure not to stay out too long in the fields," she told her husband worriedly.

The night before, he paid but small attention to the *vareniki* she had so lovingly prepared. "Eat," she had urged her husband, but Peet just shook his head.

Before they went to bed, he groped his way along the wall as though there were no candle. She saw that one of his suspenders trailed behind him, and she rushed up to him and pulled them off and quickly hugged him.

Hard.

He turned to her and smiled a wistful smile: "A dog must get used to a cat. A man must get used to old age."

"Old age? Why, look at you, Peet Neufeld. Whatever do you mean?"

"Old age," he told her slowly, "is like beholding the tide of the sea. You see it coming at you, but you can't grasp the boundless power that will erode the soil beneath your feet."

He seldom talked to her in poetry. She told him in a sudden burst of worry: "Go see the bonesetter. Don't put it off. Make sure that your bones are aligned."

"It isn't my bones. Ask a bald man what happened to his hair."

She smiled a mischievous smile. "Old age is like shaving the beard but still leaving the mustache," she told him.

He took her hand. "Why, Greta," he said tenderly. "Who raised you to such images?"

"You did. My thoughts are your thoughts. My life is your life. I count on growing old with you. I do not need to tell you."

She knew that such love as they shared could not be dimin-

ished by old age. Old age came to all. It came calling as surely as Willy came calling each New Year's Day to bring the update on the Truth and trade it for ten rubles.

Peet told her, speaking slowly: "I'm tired. *Hundemüde.* It was a hot and muggy day."

Now Greta looked out of the window. "He's leap-frogging still."

"Claas is?"

"His mind—like a rickety bridge."

"In shallow waters there's no mystery," said Peet. "Let us give thanks, instead, for Lizzy—"

He loved the little female. That Lizzy Epp, by then, belonged to Apanlee was clear to everyone. Through the open windows drifted melodies his little favorite rehearsed with nimble fingers on a flute a servant had chiseled for her.

Greta nodded eagerly, well-practiced in reading Peet's mind. "Yes, you are right. All of your sons are fond of her."

"But I would say that she loves Nicky best."

"You're right. There's harmony between those two."

"To think of her as passing on my progeny is comforting. Like putting hot feet in cold water—"

"I am afraid tomorrow will be hotter than today," said Greta. "The rye will suffer grievously—" But when she turned around, she saw Peet slumped beside his chair.

"Peet," she cried out. "Oh, Peet. Oh, my beloved."

He mumbled in a puzzled voice: "It's weeds? It's weeds that pierce through grain—?"

He never spoke again. He waged a brief but valiant struggle, and somehow lived on through the night. It was a breezy, brittle night. In the morning, the clouds moved slowly over the horizon, although it didn't come to storms. Before another day was gone, a muggy wave washed over Apanlee, but Peet passed on to meet his Maker while yet the air was crisp, the skies still blue and smooth.

Greta watched his face in silent concentration, to read what

might be written there as he preceded her into eternity. "At least he didn't suffer," she said, submitting, when all was said and done, yet loath to yield him to the preachers. "His death was swift and fair."

Woe and despair washed over her, for she had loved him much. She knew the Lord would surely console tomorrow, but little did that comfort her today.

She pulled her wedding locket from her neck and wound it through Peet's stiffened fingers. With trembling hands, she stopped his clock. She felt as though stabbed by a sharpened stiletto.

"Reclaimed by the Lord and his forebears," she announced to serfs and free servants alike.

She sent her eldest, Alexander, to lift the gleaming scythe. Her second, Nicky, took the heavy hammer from the rafters and nailed the metal to the roof. Peter, still young enough to give free reign to tears without redress for excess grief, which would have been unseemly, bent down with a choked sob and hoisted the child with the paralyzed tongue.

"Draw the black cloth across the blade," cried all the serfs in unison. "To forestall ill-matched luck—"

The neighbors told each other, nodding: "A beacon light for others is no more—"

The *Voice of Peace* proclaimed: "Departed from our midst—a brilliant, daring man."

The tsar sent a dispatch: "A man of the soil. A Moses to his people."

"Vainglorious yet, and at the very rim of grave," said Willy to Matilda, for Peet had stipulated in his will: "Be sure to bury me beneath a slab of broken marble, for my work is not yet done."

Matilda blew from her nose the salty tears the excitement of funerals brought. "Well. There he lies," said she. Pallbearers did their duties gravely. The murmur of preliminary prayers faded.

The Elder Willy bared his head. "For a thousand years in Your sight are like yesterday when it is past—" He grasped Peet's

Bible forcefully. It was a heavy book, replete with silver clasps, that had so often lain between them on the bench when he and Peet had been young boys, disputing passages. "Hear ye! Hear ye! I shall teach ye the fear."

The mourners listened silently. The Elder Willy looked around and drew on the crusading zeal that served him well at such an opportunity. He let the Holy Book fall open, and there it was, in black and white, the passage he was struggling to compose.

"Likewise, ye younger folks. Be clothed with due humility, for God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble—" The Elder's glance was full of caustic meaning. It slammed on Peet's untested progeny: "Therefore, humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time. Be sober. Vigilant. Because the Devil walks about you like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour—"

Matilda cast quick, furtive glances. The Jews. The Jews. She had already spotted several at Peet's ambitious funeral. Peet had befriended them—a people more tenacious than weeds. Matilda kept them in the corner of her eye. A wrathful God it was, Matilda knew, intent on retribution.

"Break their teeth in their mouths, oh my Lord," shouted Willy. "Break out the fangs of the young lions, oh Lord—"

The prayers made the Hebrews pull yarmulkes.

"Unless you practice vigilance, He who controls the firmaments shall take you all away. He plucks you out of your own dwelling place, and uproots you from the land of the living—"

By contrast, Peet's descendants sat, constrained and orderly and silent—a crop of blue-eyed, flaxen children, their toes lined up in unison, their shoulders straightened out. They listened to the Elder's words as he dispensed both solace and support, safeguarding them with admonition. Both were appropriate at funerals. He who had lived an unbeliever had also died an unbeliever—now it was time to plow the soil Peet Neufeld left behind.

Matilda savored funerals. You could no more have kept Matilda from a gaping grave than you could keep a goose in spring

from heading north. She throve on the solemnity that called for many handkerchiefs.

She cast arch glances at the casket: preserved and dressed up like a Pharaoh! Her temples throbbed with ecstasy. She took it all in, with a lump in her throat but an eye for the smallest detail. She felt ready to faint; she was as sweaty as a water pump, but she made sure that she missed not a thing.

Here's what the archives say: Peet Neufeld had himself the most majestic funeral of the decade.

Both rich and poor were there. Hundreds arrived in closed and open carriages, drawn to the somber spectacle by strapping horses attired in beautiful harness, white ribbons in their forelocks, tails swishing in the wind.

The poor came in bark sandals or barefoot; the nobles in convoys of splendor and sparkle, to pay their last respect. They sat upright, the haughty Russian nobles, deep in their black upholstery, their lackeys stiff behind them, staring straight ahead.

From the Valley of Jews arrived many untoward mourners, clutching their pink handkerchiefs, grieving with the grieving. They nodded to each other, gesticulating unrestrained: "He will be missed. He will be greatly missed."

Matilda spotted Moshe, the yarn-and-button peddler. She watched him deftly from the corner of her eye.

She knew he was a huckster, and maybe even worse. No matter what he sold, he fetched the highest price. His spools of thread were skimpy; they didn't last six aprons. She knew whereof she spoke: she'd checked them out, and double-checked. She had all her strategies pat.

Next time he'd appear and try to strike his bargains—why, she would slam the door. She would hide in the pantry, or else in the potato cellar.

She knew all about Jews, which was plenty. They talked so fast it made a Christian dizzy. They fasted for no reason. They always criticized the Throne. For centuries, the tsars had dealt with them by making them bleed at their noses.

Now Moshe turned his jagged profile and leaned into her face: "Who is that little girl?"

"Hush," hissed Matilda, glaring at the Jew. "The prayers aren't finished!"

The Hebrew's face fell into several added folds: "I'm sorry. See? I'm sorry."

Faint shame stirred in Matilda. This was a funeral that called for courtesy. "Her name is Olga," whispered she.

"Peet's daughter?"

"Yes. The Lord saw fit to punish."

"How so?"

"He sealed her ears. He froze her tongue. She cannot hear. She cannot speak. She cannot, therefore, understand—"

Claas scowled and started chewing on his nails. Matilda couldn't finish, for Claas let out a whoop.

"Our shields and swords for naught," shrieked Claas. "Our shields and swords for naught!"

"Will you be quiet?" Matilda cried, resolved to box his ears. "What's gotten into you?"

Claas kept on hollering while pointing at the Jews: "Scatter them by their power and bring them down, oh Lord, our shield—"

Matilda threw up her hands in despair, and Willy, forgetting to finish the Psalter, cried angrily: "Will you stop dancing, Claas? What is it now? What ails you, son? Are you in need of the outhouse?"

"Oh, Lord, do not be far from me," shouted Claas. "Stir up Thyself! Awake to my vindication!"

"He likes to have the center stage," Matilda told the Hebrew who nodded and fell back.

Matilda gave Claas a withering look and shifted cleverly: "Some people are like that."

"That boy needs help," said Moshe.

"You're telling me?"

Matilda lurched like a train about to start moving but caught herself and swallowed resolutely what she had meant to say. This

was Peet's funeral and not her quilting bee. These were Peet's friends, not hers.

"Perhaps next time I visit—"

She watched the son of Judah with cold eyes. The beard tax had been implemented long ago, but still he flaunted hair. Now he was combing through his fuzz with long and shaking fingers.

"There's ferment in his mind."

Matilda sighed. Some Jews wrote poetry as well. All bragged about their forebear, Abraham. And, worst of all, they spurned the Lord Christ Jesus who had cried out despairingly: "Jerusalem! Jerusalem!"

She knew Peet had indulged the Jews, despite her husband's direst warnings. In turn, they so adored Peet Neufeld they would have had their cannons fired here and now, had they not found themselves surrounded to a man by people of a pacifist tradition.

"Now pay attention. Will you?" Matilda counseled primly. If Peet chose of his own free will to walk among the heretics, he should not be surprised that now they saw him to his grave, which was what brought them here.

The Jew repeated stubbornly. "The boy needs help. I know a learned doctor in Berdjansk—"

"Some people can't be helped," said Matilda. "Some people never learn."

"Some, on the other hand," said he, his eye on the mute girl, "would like to learn but can't."

"Can't hear a sound. Can't say a single word," replied Matilda, shifting her focus deftly.

The peddler, in distress, combed through his beard with all ten shaking fingers and then reached out and, one by one, unfurled the little girl's cramped fingers.

"Your father told me once about his secret wish," the peddler said to her, "that you be educated properly."

The youngster looked at him with swimming eyes as if she understood. She stood, a frail but ramrod child, and nodded to his words.

Matilda, nearest witness to the odd discourse, felt suddenly

as if someone had laced her bulk into a stiff corset. She gave a toothy smile. She looked around to marshal assistance from Willy, but Willy was preoccupied: he thumbed through the Book to look for some Biblical slaughter.

"If you permit, I'll bring you books—"

Matilda felt her neck perspiring: this was a genuine emergency. From where to marshall help? Print from a city yet? Across from her sat Jacob, her husband's favorite deacon. He had a soft and nasal voice, but even so, he always packed the church.

She tried to beckon him. "Quick, Jacob! Quick!" But Jacob paid no heed, wrapped as he was in prayers. There was no energy in him. If he could sit, he sat.

The son of Judah said: "You can take in? You can't put out?"

The deaf-mute nodded silently. Two tears collected in the corners of her eyes.

"You understand, don't you?"

She nodded to that, too.

The Hebrew took a stick and carved a sign into the soil. They say it had six corners.

"That's where we'll meet. Each year, I'll come and check on you."

Matilda did not know if she should laugh or cry. To have the Hebrews' ruses claim a child this young—and silent yet!—at such a vulnerable moment, was just like drinking vodka, and on an empty stomach.

"To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever," said Willy, winding down.

Lizzy was there; she would always remember. She knew it was a sermon and a funeral nobody would forget.

Her steady eyes on Nicky's down-cast face, she whispered lovingly: "He heals the broken-hearted, and binds up every wound. Here is my handkerchief."

"I know," said Nicky slowly. His eyes met hers; they were glazed as if from a frost. To his right sat his mother, as lifeless as

the ashes the serfs raked from the stove. To his left, his two brothers sat. The Jews from the Valley stood sharply apart, as did the Catholics, as did the Lutherans. With a triumphant thud, the Elder snapped his Bible shut and looked around: "—let us return Thy servant to the earth—"

The morning was still young. All shades of light pushed hues of splendor through the ripening Apanlee orchards.

The grass was fresh and sweet. The sun was warming all.

"Amen," chorused to a voice all those who lived, and who could hope to die, at Apanlee. After a moment of absolute quiet, Matilda sank into a swoon.

"Amen. Amen." said the Catholics. The Lutherans. The servants next, and finally the serfs.

"Amen!" said the Jews as well. Their turn came last. They were the first to leave.

They shuffled through the ranks and disappeared, gesticulating to each other. On the horizon hung billowy clouds. A breeze stroked the carpet of grain as a lover might stroke the hair of a beautiful woman.

Between church and school, Peet lay buried. The slant-eyed Tartars wept.

# Chapter 6

The years slid into ice and snow. The road to certain spinsterhood was tedious.

Had Olga been just anyone's afflicted child, she would have grown into a modest spinster to sigh her life away by the window, knitting socks or stitching pillow slips while steeped in resignation. But she was still a child of Apanlee, and so they came and went, the marriageable males.

Many suitors tried their luck—from Orloff, from Sagradowka, from Alexanderwohl and Tiegenhagen and Samara. They came and left, and she could not be wooed. She merely twisted trembling fingers through her braids and hung her golden head.

Matilda hid behind curtains. Her triple-chin wobbled with grief. Why did the female scatterbrain so foolishly disdain this sober and clean-shaven fellow whose only flaw was that he squinted, or that meek cousin from the daughter settlement Grossliebenthal, who was so overcome with Apanlee he could not say a word?

And then, a truth emerged at last—a truth so utterly beyond belief that it sent tremors through the villages. Matilda, earning

extra cash by sewing and darning for others while carrying gossip between them, ran speedily from home to home as fast as her slippery *schlorren* permitted:

"—the peddler's son," she said, and fanned herself in agony.

Terror came with bat-like wings. The neighborhood trembled and shivered.

The overlords of yore became vociferous when anyone mentioned the Jews, for more than one tsar had punished their wiles and ripped open their nostrils for mischief. For this and many other reasons, the Jews were not esteemed in the vicinity of Apanlee, and for good cause: their Sundays came on Saturdays. They scoffed at honest work. They practiced usury. They changed their names at every whim, a fundamental trait. They licked their young with narrow tongues to make them just like them.

You kept them at arm's length.

A daring Jew had, many years ago, tried brazenly to move into a German village, but lightning struck his horse.

Moshe was the only Jew the settlers knew first-hand and from repeated contacts, because each year he drifted into German homes right after the harvest was reaped—to sharpen knives for hog-killing days, sell buttons and ribbons, let children pull his sidelocks, hold still while being teased for merriment, and otherwise make himself useful. If nothing else, you bought a needle and some thread and had a little fun.

He was a friendly, wizened fellow who pulled his cart or sled through the entire neighborhood and did nobody harm. But who he was and where he lived, nobody knew or cared to know. It never did occur to them that he might have a family—that he might have a son.

Now, on an early winter morning, there walked into the halls of Apanlee this curly Hebrew sprout, wooden *Koffer* opened wide:

"This blue ribbon, *Fräulein* Neufeld? Or perhaps this heart-shaped box? For your embroidery yarn?"

Many years have passed since all this happened, but the legend has survived, still as vivid and revealing as though it happened yesterday. Four generations later, its details still live on.

Large snow flakes, goes the story, melted in the Hebrew's corkscrew hair. He smiled, and Olga reddened. He did not say a word. He merely reached for her. His hands were blue with cold.

In silence, Olga took his icy fingers and led him to the *samovar.*

"A cup of tea," she would have said, with lowered lashes, had she but had the use of tongue. But she was mute; the Lord had silenced her. Instead, she looked at him, compelled to read his lips.

"A cup of tea?" he said to her, instead, while drawing on the easy charm a worldly man could summon.

She nodded, an expert at guessing.

He studied her while deepening his smile. "That would be marvelous. A cup of tea is just what this poor, frozen body needs." Might she not need to have her scissors sharpened? And how about that special skein of yarn?

She shook her head. Her eyes hung on his lips.

He chatted idle conversation as he warmed himself by the fire. He told her, though she couldn't hear, would not have understood in any case, that he was studying to revamp Russia's laws in need of overhaul, home for an early New Year's break. He was a *weltkind,* said the Jew. He palavered as though she might answer.

She leaned a little closer.

"Might I persuade you, then, to try this silver thimble?"

She blushed at that, slowly and painfully, and drew her fingers to her lips in a gesture of quiet resignation.

He understood at once. There was no shock. There was no hesitation: his father might have told him.

He kept on speaking softly, leaning close: "If I should stroke your hair, will you be very angry?"

She stared at him, within the tingle of a sweet anticipation

she had not known could stir her hungry heart. She who had never heard the sound of rolling thunder began to hear the hum of water, the drops of icicles as they fell in a clatter from the roof, the crackle of flames, the untoward roar of her blood. His hands beheld the city's sweet temptation—multi-colored ribbons, heady perfumes, sweet-smelling soaps, silken embroidery yarn.

"What can I do for you?" the serpent asked the girl.

She understood. It was a piercing moment.

"A red one, please," said Greta sharply, entering, and watched the Jew braid fire through her daughter's golden hair.

While Apanlee slept soundly, and while Peet's haughty bones were crumbling on the hill, the intruder kept wooing the foolhardy maiden. The neighborhood hung from the fences.

"Look at your people's wounded pride!" Matilda cried, for Greta was, as much as anyone, against the ill-matched union. She was a human being, too; she told the neighborhood. She couldn't help her feelings. In fact, it broke her heart: the fool girl had her brothers wrapped around her little finger. Her brothers could have put a stop to it; they could have tried, wept Greta, according to Matilda, who stood with flaring nostrils, but didn't. Didn't even try!

Nobody fooled Matilda. She knew, and she predicted: heartache would follow heartache.

From her window she watched, then bolted for the nearest neighbor: "Bearded and booted! Believe it or not!"

The neighbors all cried to a voice: "How could you keep this news from us? We'll never forgive you, Matilda."

"Left-handed, too," Matilda hissed, and fanned herself in agony.

The liaison caused a sensation. Not even once within the oldest oldster's living memory had any Jew been brash enough to beleaguer the tightly-knit clan. And that was true not only of the pacifists, who had good reason to be sovereign and to remain aloof. The Lutherans, the Catholics felt that way, too. Exactly.

No Jews! Not under any guise!

And for good cause: the Good Book told them so.

The Hebrews had scourged Him; but not before He drove them from their temple; their history of usury was documented in the Bible, where every word was true. The tsars, who were as fair as any sovereigns, refused to have Jews in the army. Vandals would often sack the Hebrews' fields and put their matches to the synagogues. But did it change them? No.

Was there a way to make an honest Christian out of an ingrained Jew?

No.

"Ribbons, red sashes, the works," cried Matilda. 'And what will follow next, the good Lord only knows."

All summer long, the Jew came courting, clad in his Sabbath best, sporting a handlebar mustache, triumphantly curled at both ends. He and the silent girl sat openly together on the steps of Apanlee. He talked and talked and talked. A light shone through her face. Her laughter came in merry bubbles. She knew the herbalists were baffled. She did not care one whit.

His fancy for her silent tongue made everyone conclude he was a fortune hunter. In fact, so eager was the Jew for Apanlee that he had blisters on both heels. Each time he came to visit, he loitered over dinner, said please and *dankeschön*, and Olga shed her bashfulness entirely and laughed out loud at what his curving smile conveyed. She radiated happiness, leafing through books that excited the skin, all the while smelling of mothballs and clover.

Gossip ran rampant. The icons themselves shed their tears.

It turned out that the clan of Apanlee—though not, at first, without some apprehension—was tolerant of curls. The brothers watched their silent sister take to love as if to benediction. If she was happy—and she was!— what more could any brother ask? That was their attitude.

They caught Matilda by her flapping apron strings and threat-

ened her in vain: "Will you keep quiet, for once? You hem seams but rip reputations!"

Matilda shook them off expertly and kept up a running account.

The brothers caught the Elder Willy by the elbow to read him the *Leviticus.*

"If you can't make her shut her mouth, we shall re-think our next donation to the church—"

"As if it were that easy," the Elder Willy snorted. He knew whereof he spoke. The Elder Willy agonized so much at what he saw rushed straight at Apanlee, he was a man near tears.

And with good cause. It was an ancient law that centuries had wrought: why mix and match with foreign blood? Why throw away a righteous life? Why not leave sleeping dogs alone? Why choose on purpose to be disobedient?

"A Hebrew?" Willy cried, enraged. "Each one of them infested with the democratic spirit."

Not that it mattered; by then nothing mattered; the two were entwined with each other. Malicious gossip flew from door to door. Idle rumors? Empty tales? If you had eyes, you saw.

The aberration ran its course. Greta resigned herself to the inevitable while dabbing at her eyes with a soft prayer shawl she had received from some potential relatives she didn't even know. Still, she kept hope alive.

"It will wear off. He will be gone by Christmas."

"He tempts," Matilda said, exuding protest from all pores. "He argues, and she listens."

And it was true; the sparrows chirped that from the roof. The deaf-mute wished the Jew would never cease to speak, for now she listened with her heart and understood the currents of another human being. He made her lively and vivacious; he made her laugh; he made her glow. Her twitchings disappeared. In broad daylight they met. In full view of all. By the Apanlee watering hole.

"He loves her much," said even Nicky, by then so blinded by his love for his own chosen, Lizzy, that he was not as vigilant as he might otherwise have been.

"He does," said Lizzy, glowing, a romantic. "It is her life. She is a lonely girl. He will surround her with protection. He loves her very much indeed. He promised he will love and cherish and protect her."

By winter, they were gone. Together. Absorbed into the Valley of Jews.

She never did come home again. There was no wedding. Ever. There was not even a betrothal the Elders might have blessed. She left, and that was that. There was no steady address. What those two did to earn an honest living remained a shrouded mystery.

"Gone to that hovel hatching sin," said Willy, shaking but relieved.

The tales grew fanciful and twisted: that he wrote ornamental essays passed on in subterranean ways; that she worked as a bottle washer to help her lover pay for ink; that he surrounded her with barbs of jealousy; that she was wasting slowly of a sad and broken heart.

No wayward child of any settler's had ever caused such grief.

She sent back greetings now and then: a pound of *Halvah* for her mother, a blouse for a beloved servant, a special book to lift her brothers' hearts.

One day came word that she had died in childbirth. You drew your own conclusions.

Her brothers hitched their haughtiest horse. It walked with wooden knee-caps beneath the windswept sky, one hoof before the other. For three days they were gone; when they came back, they brought to Apanlee a mewling, stirring bundle that Noralee and Lizzy kept warm within their sheepskins, alternating, close to their pounding hearts.

"He is a darling baby," said Lizzy in defiance and stared her neighbors down.

"And potty-trained already," bragged Noralee as well, for she was practical.

You couldn't fool the pessimists. Had Peet still lived—had he not died and thereby spared himself this mockery—why, Peet would now forever have to watch this child, his daughter's erring soul, walk bent and hunched and twisted.

One might have thought the curly-headed hunchback child would have been a decided irritant at Apanlee. But tellingly, he wasn't. It was as if a thorn had been at last withdrawn from smarting flesh: at long last, healing could begin.

Now that the foolish girl was dead, peace and calm rolled over Apanlee once more and covered all harsh feelings, as if it were an ocean. The credit for this transformation fell to Lizzy.

She pierced her blue gaze deep into the baby's onyx eyes and said: "Now, hush. He's mine. I shall take care of him."

She named the hunchback infant Benjamin to make it clear to all that he was much beloved. In teasing mockery, she called him Uncle Benny, thus putting sturdy handles on his brittle childhood, describing him as if he had a titled birthright to the wealth of Apanlee written clearly on his furrowed little brow. She stood in awe of little Uncle Benny, for he was wise and ancient even in the cradle.

Lizzy was the first to see that there was something set about this little changeling—something old and penetrating and mature—ill-suited to the knoll he had to carry on his back. Throughout his life, his spine would cause him pain. She kept propping him up with plump pillows.

"Don't stand when you can sit. Don't strain when you can rest. You hear me, Uncle Benny?"

She did what she was born to do. She mothered where she could.

She mediated, too, for Greta sorrowed privately and needed time to nestle her emotions: "He is a stranger, is he not? Don't you agree he is?"

"Hush," Lizzy said. "So what?" Was any baby smarter? As

far as Lizzy was concerned, the little hunchback was a mild and gracious child with many winning ways.

Next, Lizzy made it her campaign to help her neighbors understand that this misshapen child was not at fault that his parents had grievously erred. "He's ours," Lizzy said. "That's it. That is the alpha and omega."

And once the folks of Apanlee accepted Uncle Benny and bracketed him firmly, the neighbors followed slowly. The wagging tongues grew tired, wagging less. Those oldsters with long memories now kept them to themselves.

It was soon evident to all that Uncle Benny would grow up to be a poet and a dreamer. Nobody raised a hand to put a stop to it. To punish him for dreaming would have been just like pulling petals from a daisy.

The little strangeling dreamed such useless dreams as only artists dream. He was a verbal child. The words his stricken mother had so sadly lacked sat crowded on his tongue. It was as though he had been born atop a dictionary. He saw a sunset and broke into rhyme the way a normal child might catch the measles. A dandelion caught his dark, ironic eyes, and lo! a common weed became a tiny sun. He was like that. Astonishing.

Or take a boysenberry, for example. The scandal child would gaze at it and study it in silent concentration as though it had a soul. He held it cradled in his palm and even moved it closer to the window so he could study it some more—and it transformed; it turned into a crimson droplet, such as you drew if carelessly you plucked a rose and overlooked its thorns.

The boisterous serfs, including everybody in their salty curses as they bemoaned their lot in life—freed now from servitude by a progressive tsar, but sunk in debt that would take generations to repay—did not leave little Uncle Benny to his own devices.

"Hey, you! You little oddball, you!" they shouted lustily.

They might have meant no harm. They tried to strengthen him for life's predestined sorrows. Toward that end, they called him many hurtful names.

They often took him with them to the fields to harden him and nullify the smothering that Lizzy openly lavished on him. They scooped him up and dropped him deep into the scented hay and roared when he was spooked.

They tickled his feet. They told him bawdy stories. He flinched. He blushed, recoiling from all levity.

The servants tried to harden him with fire water, but he just gagged and shook himself—a source of consternation.

For without pointing one small, spindly finger, this little boy had power over all who came in touch with him. The tooth pullers learned to send word to put wax in his ears before they arrived with their pliers. He could not bear to see a creature suffer, be it a worm, be it a king. He was that delicate.

Take Nicky, for example.

Young Nicky was as vigorous a man as all the sturdy roots of Apanlee produced, with goodwill and with energy to spare. He owned a lucky pole; he caught fat fish when others caught small minnows.

Up the porch he raced, his bounty jerking on a copper string. "Look how they bit! Look how they bit!" he would shout joyously, and Uncle Benny, barely toddling, would throw thin arms around his uncle's knees and heave.

That's all it took. Not one small word.

"All right. All right," said Nicky.

He could have squashed the little oddling with his thumb. Instead, he hung his head in shame as though an Elder had scolded him harshly, and threw his catch, alive, right back into the waterhole of Apanlee.

He catered to the youngster's every whim. He never flicked his hissing leather whip across his stallion's back when Uncle-Benny rode with him on visits in the neighborhood. He clicked his tongue, instead. He clicked it until it was sore.

His Uncle Alexander even—he with the roar of a Siberian boar when he felt angered for moot cause!—he took his piglets to the market furtively, waiting patiently until the frail child was

asleep, head on his arms, arms on the table! then sneaking down the steps of Apanlee as though he were a thief.

Not even Noralee felt uninhibited enough to stretch a chicken neck to fill her Sunday pot. Such was the cripple's clout.

"What can you do?" asked Noralee. "He has that touch. He's magic."

She said that to her brother, Claas. By then, Claas preached with regularity.

Claas did not necessarily agree. He would shush Uncle Benny with a broom and otherwise make fun of him, but even he made sure the little hunchback took his nap before he gave the dog a blister on the sly with Greta's smoking iron.

So. Was there acrimony?

Well, yes and no. Perhaps in the beginning. It's wrong to say they didn't try. As Uncle Benny grew out of his infancy, there might have been some teasing but very little malice. The clan kept shielding him.

For all his body frailty, his mind and personality grew supple. He might have shivered at the taunts—he drew on a mysterious inner well. He nursed some odd ideas.

"What does the Bible say?" he pointed out, a steely dwarf who did not grow, regardless of the quality of Apanlee's *vareniki.* "The man who owns two mules should surely give up one."

He did exactly as he pleased, and things that pleased him very much indeed made nearly everybody squirm. He crooked his small left finger while sipping lemon tea.

He kept up an uncanny rapport with a bird.

Somebody overheard him beg, as though he were a girl whom Lizzy might have tried to teach, while showing off her knitting skills: "Will you please show me how?"

And she? She put her arm around his hump and led him to the window.

"Why not?" asked Lizzy, unawares.

She said to Noralee: "Where is the harm? Sewing and knitting will relax his spine."

Her sister's jaw just fell agape. She watched the hunchback wrap the thread around mid-finger, thumb and pinkie and settle back with ease as though the call for soil and progeny was absent in his loins.

"Take two, skip one," said Uncle Benny, while smiling a beatific smile.

Some things were hard to understand. Some things were better left untouched. Some were unnatural,

No words sufficed in any case to help you comprehend, decided Noralee. But when, a few days later, she caught a bully poking fun at Uncle Benny and his soft, gentle ways, this sturdy maid of German stock just planted chunky legs into his path and told him fiercely:

"You idiot you! You hairy freak! Now all I need to make me happy is your corpse."

Thus even Noralee, who did not waste her time on subtleties because they made her stomach queasy, took to the oddly verbal child. She grew as fond of Uncle Benny as though he were a kitten, crushed accidentally beneath a horse's hoof.

"Don't stand when you can sit," she scolded him as well, as she had heard her sister do. She added of her own accord: "Look at your skinny hen's legs! As if they can carry your weight!"

She wished that she could get him to admit—just once!—that it was wise to holler for assistance when those two spindly sticks gave out. "If you need help, just holler, Uncle Benny! Holler! We'll help you anytime."

She often found herself staring at him in alarm. He spoke High German. Low German. Russian. Ukrainian. When he leaped thus from tongue to tongue, it left her mind a-blur.

"Is that a human being?" asked Noralee, perplexed.

"You wonder," Lizzy smiled. "He is incredible at analyzing pros and cons of every known issue. He knows the Psalter Book by rote."

"The only thing he cannot do," said Noralee, "is help a cow give birth to an unruly calf."

"What for?" shrugged Lizzy, nonchalant. A task where she excelled.

Had it been up to Noralee, she would have fattened him. She held her breath when she watched Uncle Benny. Within his soul, she sensed the silence of the forest. He had no appetite at all—she couldn't get him to her table to finish three *vareniki*, no matter how much care she took, preparing them just so.

When she bent down to pick him up to carry him over a puddle, she feared that she might crack his bones; he was that delicate. She ran to stuff newspapers inside his shirt to break the force of gusts that whistled from Siberia.

If he was lost—which happened now and then, sleep-walking as he did through life, the little oddity!—she was the one who searched for him among the bushes.

She found him. She shook him. She stood him upright, and she dusted him off.

"He's getting stronger," argued Noralee, not making any secret of the fact that she was hooked, by then, on Uncle Benny's notions.

"Sure. Health permitting. Health permitting," said Matilda, slurping her soup like a satisfied cat. Matilda was a pessimist. "I keep my fingers crossed. He might develop water in his lungs."

Matilda watched him learn to read before his eyes were level with the shelf on which he kept his library. Was this tomorrow's man? He read so many books, he burned holes in the bottoms of his trousers.

Reading was not something on which Matilda wasted energy. Deciphering a church hymn was a decided undertaking.

"America: A country so enormous that you can lose yourself," he read to her, instead.

"His thoughts contain more sparkle than the most fantastic rumors," thought Noralee admiringly.

She never tired watching him as he built splendor on the sands of shifting thought. Fine words fell from his rosy, chiseled lips like pretty, fragile petals.

It was true: he had butterfly hands. His skin was free of pores—whereas she, Noralee, was pockmarked. Ear to ear.

She pondered gravely, being Willy's daughter: did Uncle Benny pray?

If so, the odds were: on one knee!

No matter, she decided loyally.

And yet. A tiny, unacknowledged part of her stood back.

"Our Motherland is running out of soil," wrote Uncle Benny soon thereafter, as though he were the Count of Petersburg instead of just a twelve-year-old still lacking any whiskers.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Soon we'll become the envy and the target of our poorer Russian neighbors—"

"What nonsense, Uncle Benny."

Noralee gnawed on her lower lip and probed a brittle tooth. When he started a book, he finished it, too. She studied him in silence: a human lexicon, sunk deep into his grandfather's abandoned chair, behind him the eyes of benevolent tsars. She knew he read voraciously. He kept himself informed.

"We must share our wealth, or we will bleed," said Uncle Benny gently.

She listened in amazement. His pointed fingertips lay on the pulse of history through papers that he ordered from Odessa.

"He looks," said Noralee to Lizzy, "like everybody's favorite aunt."

"He does. Does he not?" agreed Lizzy. "He is left-handed, true. But he's brimful of clever ideas."

Nothing so impressed Noralee as someone else's clever ideas. Here was a growing youngster who spoke and wrote as though he were a highly paid professor instead of just a tolerated loner in a warm niche at Apanlee. He examined his issues the way she examined a sock to look for a hole.

"See this?" he asked. "Read what it says here, Noralee. And give me your opinion."

He spoke to her as if she were a man instead of still a maid, unwed, though looking, looking everywhere.

"You read it to me, Uncle Benny."

"Just try."

"No. No. You read it, Uncle Benny."

"Insulation from outside control?"

He might as well have spoken Greek. She shouted at him: "So?" She often shouted in his ear as though he couldn't hear. She watched him carefully.

"Protection from racial invasion?"

When he used words like that, it helped her to remember that he was just a relative by proxy.

Her eyes would wander in astonishment across the images he etched with words across her heart as if with diamond on a pane. He talked philosophy. He spoke of betterment. He kept a copy of the tsarist promise—the royal manifesto securing rights, assuring privileges to every German settler, from the cradle to the grave—in a sealed box within his reach. He often rolled it out and studied it and let her take a peek. It was a letter with large dots and fancy flourishes, a stiff and brittle document.

"See? Jesus Christ, too, was a devoted revolutionary," said the young cripple softly.

She listened, enthralled, willing to learn. She nodded to everything, quite overwhelmed.

That he was of discerning eye and of superior intellect was clear to all who met him. Few friends he had, beyond his loving kin, but many reluctant admirers.

# Chapter 7

Years hence, the Elder Willy vouchsafed Lizzy's nickname, admitting that it did no harm. He even took some pride, when land grew scarce and parlors crowded, in seeing Lizzy make a tip-top choice for one of Apanlee's descendants who had a nickname, too.

As mentioned in the chronicles, this Nicky, christened Nicholas, the middle son of Peet and Greta Neufeld, was the young man who married Lizzy Epp before he organized the exodus to Kansas, and it was Nicky Neufeld who, while on the journey to America, drowned unexpectedly.

But that was yet to come.

Meanwhile, the years passed by. While emigration ferment ate its way into the farthest settlements, Uncle Benny snuggled quietly into the quilts of Apanlee.

Then came the decade during which the Elder Willy split the church in half as though he swung a cleaver. The sudden lure of virgin acres in a far land with a melodious name, America—nothing yet but utter wilderness and sky!—had much to do with that.

The Elder Willy had grown old. His knees gave out; no longer could he track down sinners, as he had done in olden days, but that did not stop him from trying. Everywhere he looked, and every place he checked, modernity crept in—his people planted their cucumbers sideways in harsh defiance of tradition. It didn't matter any more to most if he, their worried Elder, in anger stomped his foot or not. His eyes and ears could not be everywhere; the Fiend ensnared his lambs. No longer did his congregation members ask permission for printer's ink from Petersburg. Young people nursed outlandish thoughts.

"Like standing by a thawing river, watching the ice break into chunks," the Elder fretted to himself. To stay on top, you needed second sight.

The Elder Willy roared: "Let us, therefore, seek out a brand new wilderness to keep ourselves apart!"

The Lord would come with thunderbolts and fire darts, he threatened and cajoled. "Sifting the wheat!" shouted Willy. "Discarding the chaff!"

The angels would come swooping down, he thundered from the pulpit, to demolish the world and its wicked. Rapture was near, he discovered with the help of scriptural numerology. "Messiah will arrive—and soon! Get on your knees, meanwhile! Repent and purify!"

Did many listen? No.

"We're talking *Lebensraum!*" they shouted back at him, their beards straight in the air.

"Now Nicky has caught the America fever," said Lizzy to her sister.

"That, too, will pass," said Noralee, and for a while, it did.

The Kansas land scouts came and went. The seasons rotated. The sun took its turn with the moon. It would be several years before the Iron Chancellor made Germany an empire, before the man was born who would preach to the milling Russian masses the doctrine of a violent revolution. But even so. The watchword, even then, was *Lebensraum.*

Land hunger drove them long before the man was born who, claimed the Hebrews later, stained the good word with blood. The wonder child of Apanlee would live and die before the yellow patches with the star of David would brand his kin as traitors. Much time would pass before the rubber stamp marked "J" would empty the Valley of Jews.

Fate crept through many decades. It wove its tentacles throughout the soil, tenacious like crabgrass.

Three hundred German families had come with the first wave of wagons to the land ordained for the grain by the tsars. By the time Napoleon invaded the steppe and failed—for his audacity forced, stumbling backwards, bloodied, through the snow!—there lived eight thousand sturdy, flaxen people on the Russian soil, their handshakes firm as ever.

Their families were large indeed. The push was to the East.

And since both tsars and God decreed that all who could, should propagate—and since by strict imperial edict the homesteads could not be partitioned—it was no wonder that, in decades hence, their offspring kept on gobbling up the land.

"All homesteads undivided to the youngest," the tsars had posited, in fact. "Let the older ones fend for themselves." And they all multiplied, and prospered strongly in the Lord, and kept on swallowing fat acres.

When, midway through the century, a lenient tsar set free the Russian serfs and gave them their own scattered strips of land—but in the process saddled them with debts to tie them to their former owners more harshly than before—you found these German-looking, German-speaking settlers entrenched in tightly-knit communities as far away as Orenburg, Am Trakt, Samara, Sagradowka, Memrick.

They looked alike. They thought alike. They dreamed alike. They all had straight hair and blue eyes, long legs, strong necks, thick wrists. They all observed the rules by which they had been reared.

They clung to identical values.

In their communities, God had a place of honor, the tsars their undivided loyalty. They all upheld their forebears' tested laws. Their Elders had the wisdom of interpreters. You did not fool them, lie to them, question them or fail to carry out their orders.

The Elders saw to it, in turn, that all the settlers spoke alike—in a forced and stilted High German in school and in church, in sprawling diphthongs while at home or at their frequent *vespas.*

Time passed. The apple blossoms scattered.

And while some tardy settlers still arrived out of the West to seek their fortunes in the steppe, some who had lived in Russia for many fruitful years now started pulling out their sturdy roots in painful, sudden ways, daring to brave the great waters in search for additional soil.

Uncle Benny sensed the anguish embedded in this yen for *Lebensraum.* He had his printer's ink to help the clan decide in which direction lay its fortune, and though his whiskers sprouted sparsely if at all, many sought him out for sage and prudent counsel.

Take Noralee.

It had not once occurred to her until—while listening to Uncle Benny, and overhearing Nicky tell of America where people born to lesser wealth and status could carve a future for themselves—she realized she had some options, too.

At every opportunity, she sought out Uncle Benny for some additional enlightenment.

"America or not? Am I a fool, or what?"

"Tell me. Why do you want to leave?"

"My own shed, filled with hay?"

"Certainly."

"My own cow, giving milk so rich in cream I need only ladle it right off the rim?"

"True. Chances are that's true."

She and Lizzy often raced each other to the stalls of Apanlee—no greater joy than seeing fresh milk frothing in the pails, and seeing who squeezed more from a beleaguered cow. Her head

sat level on her shoulders. "How many liters, Uncle Benny?"

"Nine hundred liters *per annum.*"

"No! Nine hundred? Did you say nine hundred liters?"

"You heard me. Nine hundred liters."

She bit her nails in her impatience. Such prospects were almost too much.

Uncle Benny stayed his patient glance on her. He never laughed at her when she asked silly questions. He treated her with an extravagant respect, as if she were a land scout coming for advice instead of just a struggling maid—unmarried still despite relentless efforts!—who scrubbed the sheets of Apanlee until her shoulders flared and blisters formed on both her water-shriveled hands.

Uncle Benny pulled a map and pointed a thin finger. "See here? Right in the center of America." He leaned back in his chair and asked in a low voice: "Noralee, now tell me carefully. Why do you want to leave?"

"Does barley grow in America?

"Yes."

"Rye?"

"Yes."

"Oats?"

"Buckwheat, lentils, peas, hemp — everything."

"Well, then. It is decided." Noralee leaned back in her chair and spoke firmly: "I opt for the untrodden land." She thought her lungs would burst, her heart explode with excitement. "One cow is worth nine hundred liters?"

The changeling with his chiseled words and his affinity for history spoke slowly: "Here. See? I'm underlining it with my red pencil."

"You know I have weak eyes. I can't read anthing that small."

*"Lebensraum,"* said Uncle Benny, fond of his double-jointed words. "That is the issue. Isn't it?"

"So?"

She listened while he talked, explaining things to her. He never lost his patience. She listened with stunned joy while he

kept analyzing pros and cons of staying versus leaving.

"It tears apart large families," said Uncle Benny slowly as if he were a scholar teaching school in Petersburg, buffered by enormous wages, instead of just a budding bachelor wrapped in a blanket on cold days with pillows all around him. "It drains our villages of needed strength. Bakers, cobblers, tailors, carpenters—everybody's leaving!"

"Yes. Everybody wants to go."

"There must be better ways."

She couldn't think of any.

By his window in Peet's study, the young cripple spent his pensive afternoons sitting on embroidered cushions, sipping tea, nursing a malaise deep within his fragile spine, composing complicated editorials. "Cows find their pastures here as there," he wrote. "The key is land reform. The watchword is equality."

Noralee, who stopped by visiting as often as she could, gave him a sidelong glance. She opened her mouth to say something blunt and snapped it shut again.

"A cow," she pointed out at last, "is the beginning of a herd."

That was but one of Noralee's ideas. She devoted herself to her favorite task: to look for a man of her own. If she could snare herself a husband, then she could travel to America as well. All she needed was a man—a thought so novel and so mesmerizing that it would startle her at night.

Before too many years had passed, the Elder Willy was the one who shouted loudest: *"Lebensraum! Lebensraum!* To set ourselves apart!"

When many years ago his father settled in the steppe to baptize in rivers and lakes, cheap land had been there for the asking. The Elder Willy could have laid claim to his share of good soil for his numerous young, had agrarian riches been part of his uppermost aim.

Instead, it was the grain of Faith he chose to sow into the hearts of needy youth—important work, he knew, to be contin-

ued by his sons and his sons' sons and their sons' sons as well. Now children grew faster than income!

Though he was old, the Elder Willy was no fool. He knew it was wiser to join than defy. He heard the shout for *Lebensraum,* right in his living room.

Between three fruitful females, he had produced so many offspring he knew not how to count them. They all needed soil. They strained at the seams of time-tested values with their eyes on the cities of Babel. As land shrank more and more, the Elder Willy knew with ever-deeper certainty that it was time to leave.

When Willy resolved to splinter the church, the pressure for land was exploding the homesteads around him. There was no choice, the Elder Willy thundered: the congregation must be split and purified. How else to keep control?

"We've moved before, and move we will again. Be this, again, God's will."

It was a controversial decade. It brought with it much heartache and added to the conflict that tore not just the settlements but close-knit families apart.

"And, meanwhile," said the cautious ones, "there is the covenant. We came here to strengthen the tsars. In turn, we were given a scroll. The tsars have kept their word. Dare we do less? We owe them loyalty."

It seemed at first God did not like the split—the walls caved in, the choir ran out of tunes, the weekly offerings were meager.

"It's us," the Elder shouted heartily, though already on faltering knees, "against the wicked world!"

Finding souls who needed purifying was like working on a clearing. His voice still counted at revivals. He mixed the message for new land with rules for stricter living: v*erboten* to eat horse meat; *verboten* also slapstick jokes, silk suspenders, fire water, dominoes.

The fires of renewal proved spectacular.

The new church's followers increased in numbers. They jumped and shouted in their joy at having been reclaimed from

Satan's claws just in the nick of time.

They called themselves The Brethren so as to stand apart. The Brethren shunned debts, dancing, gambling, hail insurance, excessive Sunday laughter. They railed against the gatherings of the unmarried. They warned against the mischief of the Catholics, Lutherans and Jews.

Nicky Neufeld was a handsome youth with rippling arms and strength to spare who listened keenly to the pros and cons of leaving versus staying. At sunset time, when all work stopped and workers went to find the straw on which to rest their bones, he went to consult with the land scouts.

"Now tell me more about America," said Nicky eagerly. "Good soil and gentle hills?"

Nicky was as peaceful and as stately as the legendary Oak of Chortitza, a gentle animation sparkling ever from his eyes. Of stories of America he could not have his fill.

"Just where, precisely, is America?" teased Lizzy.

He looked at her with longing: what might it take to nuzzle that pink ear?

"Near Pennsylvania," he told her promptly, winking.

She looked at him and read his thoughts, producing pretty blushes. He looked at her and puffed his pipe. He noticed with a wildly pounding heart how suddenly the autumn breeze blew freely through her blouse.

Why not? The sun shone here as there.

"Cows, here as there," said Lizzy, while pouring her chamomile tea. She was content. Whatever Nicky wanted would be her pleasure, too. She gave him ample leeway; she was a willing female.

He brushed against her accidentally. She laughed and fed him sugared apples. They were young, healthy and in love.

Both took their time. There was no rush. He courted her in proper fashion, observing every single rule.

They looked each other over. She matched his kinfolk's ex-

pectations and still had room to spare. He matched her inner qualities, her stepfather in piety, her long departed mother's relatives in values, her forebears in self-discipline and drive.

He knew of her: thrift and frugality. Home remedies. Clairvoyance when it came to zwieback recipes.

She knew he had a sixth sense for the grain.

Nicky fenced a patch of grain and spared it at the harvest. Each day he checked, until he saw the strongest kernels separating from the sheaves. With careful hands, he stroked across the tips so that they sowed themselves. A patient man, he did that five years running until the wheat was amber gold.

"Those are God's kernels, selected by Him," he told Lizzy.

"Yes, Nicky. You are right." She echoed every word.

She realized that she would have to stay away from Apanlee until an Elder tied the matrimonial knot empowering the future. She saw her Nicky coming down the winding road, replete with hat and new galoshes, to have a chat with Willy.

And everyone knew why.

The time had come to wed. It was a happy time. The seasons did the rest. The two of them were made for one another other as if poured from a uniform mold.

When the cherry orchards turned to snow, the Elder Willy gave his blessing to the union. That day, he was uncommonly verbose. He told them that just as the Cossacks buttressed their beloved tsars with bayonets, so would the Holy Ghost sustain and buttress Lizzy and her chosen and shield them from all harm.

They had four children in five years—a splendid first-born they named Jan, along with three nondescript girls.

Being in her husband's arms, confided Lizzy once to Noralee—she, still not wed but looking hard, looking simply everywhere!—was just like sleeping on fresh hay. Her heart was as full as a river about to run over its banks.

Noralee could only reply, overwhelmed: "Lucky you. Oh, lucky you."

She knew, a realistic maiden: God in His bounty would provide, though with her pockmarks and her freckles—who could tell?—she might end up with someone limping on both sides and with a lisp to boot.

"No matter," she decided.

That was Noralee's favorite phrase. Long before she grew into a ripened woman with round shoulders and wide hips, excellent with needlework and knitting, it dawned on Noralee that she herself need not stay all her life within the backwaters of Apanlee, watching Lizzy preen herself having *vespa* with the Russian nobles, a napkin on her knees. If she could get herself a husband, she, too, could travel to America—a country without rules and hardly any borders.

America! A country without tsars!

The scouts kept seeking out their targets, filling ledger after ledger carefully with age, date, well-established rules.

Who could have resisted? Not she.

"Faith will be the pied piper's weapon," said Uncle Benny softly. "Obedience his tool."

She pondered that as well. She knew that Uncle Benny was obedient, considerate, and never spoke a lie. She treated him with reverence; he did the same for her.

"The messenger who rides on Faith," said Uncle Benny next to Noralee—his willing audience always, no matter what the season—"will take the golden hopes of men and leave but mounds of ashes."

"For everything, there is a precedent in history," frail Uncle Benny pointed out.

"A precedent?"

"A prior reason."

"Huh?"

It was comforting to be told there was a reason for the things she did not understand and had no wish to know.

He spent another patient Sunday afternoon on intellectual betterment. She listened. She absorbed. But as often as not, she

would shrug. "You read too much," she told him.

"I'm strong," she said. By contrast, he? As fragile as an egg. A breeze could topple him.

With deep and heaving sighs, she kept surmising he might grow into a pale and sickly man who then would light his pipe three times a day—no doubt to prove his manliness!—a learned man with rosy fingers and always in the public eye, with total recall of the smallest detail. And she was right. All her predictions would come true. But that was yet to come.

Had Uncle Benny lived to see clairvoyance to conclusion, he might have warned in finely crafted editorials: "Beware! Beware not of the clarity of reason, but of the cat's soles that are faith's."

He would have said, to those who stayed, as well as those who left in droves: "Look, here as there, a land of opportunity. As long as we're willing to share."

The fragile cripple born to the sturdy clan of Apanlee would live and die and never see the cross of destiny that hooked its barbs into the hearts of modest men by shouting: "*Lebensraum*!" He of the alien blood—some oldsters had long memories!—would never hear the voice that sprang atop the crest of global sentiment to hammer souls of sober men into a searing blaze: *Lebensraum*!

And yet. He sensed that blood would flow like water.

Why did he speak to Noralee? Because she listened. She absorbed. She always heard him out with open ear. She patted his shoulder, nestling him into a corner. She scurried for several additional pillows.

"Stay out of the draft, Uncle Benny," she cautioned.

# Chapter 8

So much is lost of history. Of Nicky, the archives tell but little—only that he saw the light of life two decades after Waterloo. It would appear he was a man of iron health—a swimmer even, so the archives claim—but it was Nicky, sadly, whom the Lord, inscrutably aggrieved, would wash into the ocean.

Why was He aggravated with so kind a man, so good a man? To this day, no one knows.

It seems to many, even now, as they leaf through their history, the Lord should have approved. They claim that Nicky should have lived, a farmer's son, one of the best that Apanlee brought forth, devoid of any quirks. He should have brought his wheat to Kansas: for it was Nicky Neufeld who, one rain-washed Saturday, hammered six hefty boards into a trunk to hold the hardened grain.

Nicky Neufeld, they will say, stood out above and from his brothers by his progressive spirit. All three wore beards, and all three kept them trimmed to allow for breezy thought, but Nicky's beard was not just trimmed—he kept his face hair angled sharply.

"Help me decide, my dear," said Nicky to his wife. "America

or not?" He fancied many modern notions, such as permitting women equal say.

"Christ walks before us everywhere," said Lizzy evenly, a sweet, compliant woman.

"You're certain, Lizzy? It's for good. We're never coming back."

"Yes, Nicky. I am certain. We take along our fathers' Faith. With us travels Christ the Redeemer."

"There will not be instant success."

"I count not on instant success. I'll travel on horseback, by donkey or on foot."

Beholding Nicky, famished for soil, she was sure that the Kingdom of God would realize itself—no less there than here. What did she want? Whatever he wanted. Land. Peace. A flock of well-scrubbed children—like everybody else.

She knew the land of Apanlee, passed on to Alexander, could not be sliced asunder. Peter, too, was packing now, having claimed a homestead in the East where pious daughter colonies were sprouting from the soil like mushrooms after rain.

Only natural, therefore, that Nicky, third in line for Apanlee, hankering to carve a landed kingdom for himself, would be the first of many men who started eyeing the blank spaces on the map that boasted but a single settlement one might have called a city.

Wichita.

Lizzy's heart grew lighter than a feather. Her trust in her Lord and her love knew no bounds. In that way, she resembled the Biblical Ruth—a genuine Biblical female. To her, the lure of foreign soil was not an alien thought.

"Get thee out of thy country," her Bible had instructed her, this with the help of Willy. "And from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee. And I will make of thee a great nation."

"Your land will be my land," said she, eyes brimming over readily. "Your joy will be my joy."

America—a country so enormous that from New York to

California took longer than to cross the ocean twice as wide and dangerous to boot. Let him not think she was not well-informed. Her children would need land. She would not be a mother who would rely on table-tapping.

Before the decade ran its course, the Elder Willy told the congregation firmly: "The world is drifting deeper into sin. A new start in a wasteland, far from all wicked influence, is what we need to keep ourselves apart."

Dreadful news had trickled down out of St. Petersburg: The tsarist manifesto that had pledged ethnic sovereignty and freedom from conscription was splintering like glass.

The treachery came as a blow. Word flew from mouth to mouth: "The *Wanderstab* again?"

An Elder was dispatched in haste to learn how far the tsarist promise stretched. He spied himself a civil servant and waylaid him in the palatial garden.

"The gun and sword for pacifists?" the Elder probed, his hat in hand, his dogged German diphthongs crowding on his tongue.

The underling had a beaked look and spoke with a decided sneer: "What's this? How long have you been here? Three generations? Four? And still, you haven't mingled? And still, you don't speak Russian?"

"We have a royal document securing separate schools—"

"A sad mistake. A turn of speech. Watch me. I spit on it. I tear it into pieces and throw it to the winds"

The Elder cried, enraged: "But that is treachery! That's blasphemy! We'll leave! We'll go!"

To that, the bureaucrat replied, unmoved: "So go. What's it to us? You have ten years to leave—"

The churches were packed, with standing room only. The breach of trust cut deep. No prayers could settle the conflict. The faithful prayed repeatedly for guidance and direction. The future still remained for most of them a gaping question mark.

It was, the chronicles recall, a time of push and pull. It tipped

the scales for many. Had someone said: "Democracy!" it would have had no meaning.

This much they sensed, however: in faraway America, life would be just like gravity reversed. The top layers would fall to the bottom; the bottom would rise to the top.

Old Willy still had energy to spare for storm-tossed village council meetings, where farming opportunities across the waters were debated with much heat. He was always the first to arrive at such meetings, the last to shut the door. Old Willy made sure he missed nothing. Old Willy was there to be heard.

"Facts are facts," the land-hungry settlers would outshout each other. "Children grow faster than gains. Our families are huge. Our income trifling by comparison—"

The Elder climbed on chairs and tables: "So let us leave for our Faith—"

"No. Let us stay to honor promises—"

"Conditions will improve—"

"No. No! And triple no!"

Leave? Stay? Impassioned speeches filled the air. Why not pack up and go and plow the land no farmer's hand had touched? The church pews shook. The tide of hunger for new land rose mightily, seeped into every home. Soon, it was said in the *Herald of Truth,* the publication of the Brethren: "We pity the next generation."

"The home of the wolf, the badger, and the eagle," said some and shook their heads. But others spoke persuasively: "Vast corn fields ripe for harvests, and pastures populous with herds."

"—let's look at Turkestan—"

"—the distant Amur regions—"

"—New Zealand—"

"—better yet, America—"

A few cried out: "America? The land of pitch black cannibals?" But many others had it pat: a land where milk and honey flowed.

In his endeavors for new soil, the Elder Willy had two aides

who challenged his resolve. They treated him as though he were a human wishbone, by pulling this way and that way.

One was a deacon, Jacob by name, a widower with water in his lungs, who was a distant relative. Jacob was timid as a hare. The other one was Claas, his son, who had more zeal than sense.

"No need for haste! No need for haste!" intoned the Deacon Jacob. He often repeated himself.

He, too, had felt the population pressure keenly, down in the churning marrow of his bones, having borne his share of landless grief, his offspring tumbling round him, puppies, full of fuss and agitation, with little space to roam. Who knew what lay in wait across the storm-tossed waters? He coughed and wiped a cold, damp brow.

"But haste is all that matters!" shouted Claas who, as he grew to manhood, thumbed through his Bible more and more, eager to frighten, to flay and to scold. Ever since his childhood days, there had been people asking him to testify to visions. Claas was besieged with visions. Fiery tongues leaped from his lips straight at the congregation.

Claas Epp bestirred himself to an odd ministry. He next reversed direction as though he were a crab.

He, too, had caught America fever. He was convinced, however, that he should travel East.

He staked out his disciples.

Juxtaposed to all the status, wealth and elegance of Apanlee lived many landless families, fanning out in every direction, living in small huts at the outskirts of the village. The *Anwohner Tracts,* they were called - where folks lived on the margin.

Each morning, long before the roosters crowed, the Apanlee folks took generous pitchers of milk to the *Anwohner Tracts.* And where did Noralee still live, as though she were a serf? In a hut in the *Anwohner Tracts.*

Noralee scrubbed all the sheets and tablecloths at Apanlee, rinsing them in sparkling water, while Lizzy entertained the land scouts. Lavishly. If that was not enough to get your dander up,

then what?

"And all I need," she told her sister, "is a husband."

"You need a husband," echoed Lizzy, who spoke from happiness.

In her stepsister, Noralee found a natural ally. Ever since their infant days, those two had looked upon each other with approval and delight.

"I'll take the plunge," cried Noralee. "I have a plan. I have a strategy. Just wait. Just wait and see."

She, too, would find gold. Or glory. Or both. She knew such luck as Lizzy had did not strike twice within one family. And since she knew she was not likely to be wed to one of fortune's favorite sons, her eyes shrewdly settled on Jacob.

She rolled her eyes with meaning. A man was a man, she concluded, even someone who was cackling like a spinster when she unleashed a skillful rumor. The rumors Noralee let fly all had a clever purpose. All had to do with land—land, land and yet more land, as fat as bacon slices! Since Lizzy started dreaming of America, that's what she wanted also. When *Lebensraum* took hold of Noralee—this inbred urge for soil and progeny—she could no longer be content that she had every right on earth to use the outskirt pastures, all part of Apanlee, for plucking dandelions for her goats. She longed to have a cow. And once she had a cow—why, she could beat her sister's butterballs!

When she arrived at that conclusion, she realized that she had reached a major turning point.

That she had staked the Deacon Jacob out romantically was not a secret to his ducks.

"You're bold enough for both," teased Nicky, smiling slyly.

The Deacon Jacob gasped and wheezed and coughed, not nearly as sure of himself. "Meanwhile, pray," was his advice to Noralee, who did, but not as often as he wished.

Jacob's approach to problems big and small was one of patience, reticence and prayer. He said his prayers carefully, leaving wide loopholes either way. Thus He could use his prayers, or

else reject them, verily, as He alone saw fit.

The Deacon Jacob knew the need for land, an anguished issue, verily! was much too large for his forbearing brain.

"Should we depart? Should we remain?" he muttered on his knees before he used the chamber pot, for he slept better on an empty bladder.

He coughed behind his hand, while glancing helplessly about when, by and by, it dawned on him that Noralee laid siege with greatest care.

She started listing all her assets. "I never loiter over breakfast. My boiled eggs are perfection. When washing meat, I do not throw the water out. I feed it to the carrots."

He pondered that, while she stood waiting. Smiling.

"You do?" said Jacob in the end.

"I'll boil your mildewed shirts in milk."

"That's wasteful," muttered Jacob, mildly scolding.

She was a female on her toes. "In sour milk, that is."

By contrast, Jacob was a pessimist. He brushed that off. "It might not work. It might not work."

She looked at him with speculating eyes. "That iron rust on your frayed cuffs? Why, it will disappear as if by magic with just five drops of vinegar."

"But why—"

"I am an expert at removing iron rusts from trousers." She stood, ballooning with ambition. "Is that a burn on your left thumb? Why, here is melted soap."

"The solemn days have not yet passed," said Jacob, a stern widower.

"He is much older than you are," sighed Lizzy, thinking of her sister's rotund energy as contrasted by Jacob's slow, evasive shuffle.

"That's not the worst of it," confided Noralee. "In need of constant prodding. But no matter." Noralee blew forcefully into her tea so that the droplets sprayed. "He has produced six chil-

dren, has he not? You draw your own conclusions."

"I have grave doubts, regardless," said Lizzy carefully, a pink glow on her cheeks.

Noralee had made up her mind. Concessions blended in her ample bosom as milk and coffee blend. For herself, she preferred the taste of raw onion, but she could adjust; she would adapt. She was resolved she would not end up in the brine of life just like a pickled gherkin.

She stalked Jacob from picnic to picnic. "The American kopecks," she gossiped, "lie in the gutter. The American Jews hide their gold in their teeth."

"What? What?" he asked.

"You heard me."

"Are you sure? Hey? Are you sure?"

He nearly drove her mad. If she but said "America," his glance would slide away.

She was determined, though, for since she clearly lacked the choices Lizzy had, she, Noralee, would settle placidly for what she herself could get.

Her sister and her sister's husband kept her buoyant in her efforts. "Any progress to report yet, Noralee?"

"I hope so. I sinserely hope so." Noralee flicked invisible specks of dust off her freckled arms.

"Well, don't give up. Just look at it this way," said Nicky. "In the end, it will be easier to say yes than to say no."

Noralee was sniffling with the overflow of her frustrating struggle. "Once the big tree is felled, it is easy to work with the offshoots?"

"You guessed my thoughts, Noralee."

"If I knew it would work, I would act." She didn't even blush.

She knew that love before marriage was like stripping the bark from a tree. But an imperfect plot was better than no plot; that's why she said: "No matter."

And meanwhile, why not build some castles in the air? It was incumbent upon her to seize an opportunity.

She had clear eyes about that sort of thing. She would just move from rung to rung. She would not die unloved and unwed. With no discernible bloodline between her kinfolk and Jacob's to chance a harelip for a child, she saw no bars for what she had in mind.

The Deacon Jacob never had a chance. Her need was like a timeless wave that kept on pounding at a crumbling shore.

He didn't much discourage her pursuit; in fact, it flattered him to see her so determined. He knew she had her eye not just on him but on America as well, although he felt ambivalence on both accounts and said as much to Nicky.

"Just take the plunge," urged Nicky. "And leave the rest to her."

The scouts that Nicky had sent forth some time ago were more believable than ever. They had brought back a box of soil, some grass, a folded newspaper out of a prairie town.

Now Noralee kept crumbling both between her eager fingers: "A land where milk and honey flow?"

She scouted for additional detail and had more talks with Uncle Benny, all with eye-opening results.

A country full of unbelievers—bald as a shorn sheep's fleece. No roads or tracks. No bells to warn of an approaching troika. No priests to walk their icons for the peasants.

But boots instead of wooden shoes.

Travel without passports.

And best of all: for everyone, no matter whom, a cow with velvet eyes.

No wonder Noralee thrilled to assorted possibilities. She practiced saying: "Wichita."

Enthusiasm for this town called Wichita just made her spittle flow.

# Chapter 9

To get the Deacon Jacob to propose turned out to be a major undertaking. He would no more reveal his feelings than his enameled chamber pot. But circumstance and serendipity played into reticence. The mourning period had passed; he had his choice of willing females; there were at least three waiting spinsters singing hallelujah in his choir.

"So—emigration, yes or no?" probed Noralee. She carefully sprinkled her goose path with sand.

As Jacob went about his tasks, side-stepping various booby traps this eager female set for him, the stories he picked up about America were not at all alluring.

He dreaded Noralee. If marry he must, then marry he would, but why should it be Noralee—what with her thirst for land across the murky waters? The moment Noralee spoke of America, the trees around him spun.

"Let's leave! Let's leave!" urged she.

He did not want to go. He did not even want to marry, truth be told, although his orphans needed somebody to tie them to their chores.

"Stay in the country of your birth—" intoned the Deacon Jacob timidly, thus counteracting Biblically.

Beneath her smoking lamp, she kept on hatching strategies. She peered into his faded eyes. "Here. Try my kitchen kvas."

He had a nose bleed as a last resort. An optimist would have despaired.

"The river, full of fish," the Elder Willy counseled Noralee. "And all you need is patience and a fishing rod, my child."

She and the Elder Willy saw eye to eye on emigration matters. As far as her own father was concerned, marrying a strong-willed daughter with a hunger for the soil across the ocean to an authenticated preacher—although, regrettably, a man with porous lungs and an effacing smile—moved matters in desirable directions while keeping close control.

"The river, a mere trickle," mourned Noralee, and rolled her eyes dramatically.

"No progress yet?"

"No progress whatsoever," lamented Noralee.

When she carried all those buckets on a yoke to scrub the linen piles of Apanlee, she moved with the purposeful ease of a dignified cow.

"I'll help you," promised even Lizzy.

Next time she saw the Deacon Jacob standing by the waterhole, wrapped in thoughts or prayers or both, she gave her sibling a firm shove.

Noralee took two determined steps and pointed out the obvious: "Remember the story? Adam and Eve?"

The Deacon Jacob stiffened at the brazen effort: "What? What?" Her need intensified the whistle in his lungs. He plucked a many-colored handkerchief that she had given him at Christmas and mopped his wrinkled brow. His rib cage rattled faintly. "What did you say? Whatever did you say?"

She was near howling, by that time, with injury and pride but decided to swallow her gall.

"Feed him a peacock tongue," laughed Nicky, a merciless

man. "Or better yet, why not train Jacob's horse?"

Wise counsel she couldn't ignore.

She started feeding it each morning at the gate of Apanlee, where she did all her laundry chores. She even swept the droppings up to keep the path free for romance. She thought of everything.

It happened as predicted—the deacon's horse stopped dead one wind-blown morning and would not move a hoof while waiting for the feed. The deacon pulled and pushed. The hoar was hanging from his ears.

"Come in. Come in. Here's my warm laundry room," coaxed Noralee. "It's cold. Here, let me thaw you out."

He blushed the color of a lobster. A droplet started thawing from his nose.

"I can't imagine—can you?— what caused that horse to stop? Right by your gate?"

"I can't imagine either," lied Noralee, and didn't even blush.

"Coincidence, no doubt," Lizzy brought up the rear.

Trapped helplessly between two scheming females, the deacon finally caved in. "To tell the truth, my feet are cold. In fact, I barely feel my toes."

"Here, put your bunions in my soapy water."

Noralee pulled off his boots as if expecting to find buried treasures. She lowered his feet into the suds as though lowering them into a well.

"I work like a demon," she told him. "Look at my hands. See all those calluses?"

He saw. He stared. He knew that it was touch and go.

She watched him with her hungry eyes. "How are your ducks?"

"Ducks? Ducks? What ducks?"

To get him to declare himself was worse than stepping on a log afloat in turgid waters. She set her chin. She had made up her mind. She knew the day would come when she would cross that ocean to make a life belonging to herself. "I know that you

have ducks that are neglected badly. Now, I hold ducks in high esteem."

"My ducks are fine. Just fine."

Relentless, that was Noralee. "Your geese? How are your geese?"

"My geese are fine. As well."

She overlooked the glister on his upper lip. "Your goats?"

"What? What?"

"You heard me." What could he do, poor bachelor, beside her washboard, trapped, his feet deep in her bucket? She whispered in his ear: "You would be marrying a touch-me not—"

The Deacon Jacob jumped as if a twig had snapped beneath his soles.

"I need more time," wailed Jacob, his blue toes stuck in suds. What happened next is left for anyone to guess.

It dawned on Jacob, by and large, that Noralee, defying the astonished faces of the congregation, had sprung a trap on him.

When he proposed, perplexed at what had happened, she looked as smug as a successful pickpocket—and he, as sheepish and as pleased as if he had been caught, not accidentally with Noralee—who just forgot herself, that morning, in her laundry room, as later she would tell the congregation, her face aflame with memory—but with a scheming and notorious lady of the night.

However, he was honest with himself. He was a man. She was a willing maiden. His geese needed feeding. His shirts needed buttons. His children all had runny noses and needed laundered handkerchiefs.

That's how and why it was that Jacob married Noralee.

Soon afterward, she found herself engulfed in combat with a feather.

"America or not?"

"Let's pray for guidance," shuffled Jacob. He coughed behind his hand and uttered mild objections one could read either way.

She glared at him. Her hands turned into fists. Had she not been a pacifist, she would have struck him. Hard. "Give me one solid counter-argument. One cow: nine hundred liters."

"That can't be true. It can't."

"Just think of it. Nine hundred liters."

"Impossible," gasped he.

"One cow. Nine hundred liters."

She told her wheezing husband morning, noon and night: "I opt for the untrodden land."

Not much had changed for Jacob except that, now, the warmth of matrimony pressed nightly to his buttocks. As he had done before, he preached in all the places Willy laid out for him, earning extra kopecks as a cobbler on the side while trying to make up his mind.

He turned white and gave a shudder when she but said: America.

She parceled out her finest reasons. "We could compete with Apanlee."

"That would be vanity."

"A goat and a pig, that's all that we possess." By then, Noralee was close to uncontrolled shrieks. "Young and old are dreaming of America. Why not us, too? We could upgrade to cows."

Jacob worried more and more that he was falling prey to vanity. He was a humble man.

At Apanlee, there was no end to wealth. The flail and threshing floors had long since disappeared; from far away, the Russian peasants came to weigh their newborn children and watch how old-fashioned windmills converted to steam. Nobody boasted such power.

"Our home," she argued heatedly, "the smallest hut in the entire village. Merely a bench, a table and two chairs."

"We're simple folks. Why pretend?"

"Your children! Look at them!" howled a frustrated Noralee. "Don't they deserve a chance?"

She cut down his resistance like sheaves. She gathered footing to strengthen her cause. On the bench that ran along the oven sat all six of them, all barely fed sufficiently with cabbage, carrots and potatoes she grew with Jacob's patient help.

"Whenever I peel a potato, I have to plant the skin! Is that a way of life? You tell me! You give me one good reason!"

He peered at her across the turnips on the table: "Here is a radish, Noralee. Sniff it. It might clear your nose."

"Where did it grow?" she wept in frustration. "On a patch the size of a postage stamp—"

"I call it your fine kitchen garden," scolded Jacob.

"In America, rich and poor can mingle absolutely everywhere. The rich sink to the bottom. The poor rise to the top."

"Do not indulge in senseless dreams. I beg of you. I beg you."

"What do we own? The oldest hens in the entire village. Across the waters, we'd have a chicken coop that's larger than a barn."

She cried, a stubborn woman: "Before I die, I want to feed my family a Christmas pudding filled with raisins."

Her aging husband shook his head. "Your vanity! You look like a bloodthirsty eagle."

In her father, Noralee found a natural ally. She swarmed all over him. She poured her grief across his prayer book.

He knew whereof she spoke. America was beckoning—had he been but a decade younger, he might have gone! He would have gone! He would have set a fine example! But by now, he had reached the Biblical age.

Noralee made Willy sit down and total them up, the descendants that sprang from his loins and survived: eleven boys and girls in all, sixty-three grandchildren, even a few great-grandsons. All hungered for the land. All had the qualities that guaranteed survival. All daughters married fruitfully as proof of a pious existence.

"And all you do," the Elder argued with his deacon son-in-

law on Noralee's behalf, "is pick the gold that is already lying in the gutter."

Jacob kept slurping his soup. He touched neither tea nor tobacco.

"I have big dreams," howled Noralee. "Look at your sons! What if the tsar starts drafting them? Will you stand by and watch your sons kill other fathers' sons? Think! Think of all the open spaces. "

"What spaces? Full of weeds and thistles."

"Flat acres, Jacob. Cheap!"

"Sure. Cold winds blowing over them?"

"I'm frostbitten now. I'll wear two of everything."

"We barely have the money for the tickets—"

"I'll travel steerage, Jacob! Steerage!"

"I haven't finished learning Russian."

"I do not care," shrieked Noralee, a full-blown traitor, verily! "if in America the birds chirp English, too!"

"It's now or never," decided Noralee. Lizzy and Nicky were packing already, about to leave and never to return.

She focused all her energies. She would not stay behind. She took her husband by the hand and led him to the children's chambers and said to him: "You can't squeeze in a hand. If one more comes, that's it."

"If one more comes," saith he, backed finally into a corner, "I promise that we'll go. "

That's what it took. She had his word. She waited for a rainy afternoon, waylaid him skillfully, threw every bolt, hooked every chain, and dropped her underskirt.

The Deacon Jacob looked around and felt a choking sob: The front yard crowded, fence to fence, as if it were a funeral. He watched all his meager possessions diminish. Piece after piece was borne away; only a few odd items remained.

"A chair," the auctioneer kept hectoring. "A chest. A hoe. Two buckets with good handles. An authentic grandfather clock—" Soon, he was hoarse from shouting.

"—with copper weights!" Noralee triumphantly finished his sentence.

What could not be sold, she had promised to give to the poor.

"A button box!" yelled Noralee. "An old hand grinder for your oats! Two mittens and a spare."

She was in soaring spirits. She had finished the tasks for the voyage: packing her two dozen trunks, wrapping all of Jacob's children's clothes into bundles and tying them, cross-wise, while triple-checking every knot.

"Left and right, we wish you luck!" the neighbors said to Noralee, who ballooned with importance and rapture. The goats were gone, the cow was gone, pulled straight from the pasture and driven away. She rattled her coins in her can.

A fear gripped Jacob then and there. He started shaking like a leaf whirled up within a hurricane. He whispered: "Noralee, there's something wrong with me."

She burst into cruel laughter. "Too late. Say what you will. Too late."

Perspiring copiously, he sat down on a pile of discarded burlap, observing how she made the most of every good-bye. "Imagine. Imagine all the possibilities," she cried, a woman without mercy. "One cow! Nine hundred-twenty liters!"

He collapsed on a mountain of blankets and pillows.

She didn't even notice. She was pushing her valuables into a sack, beset by a crowd of curious onlookers who had gathered in front of her hut.

He tried to rouse himself. The trees spun, round and round.

At supper time, he tried to force himself to eat. A bit of gravy dribbled on his collar. He wheezed: "I don't feel well. Let's reconsider."

She pushed him down and called him names, intoxicated with the immigration spirit.

Before she left to find a new life in America, she dressed the Deacon Jacob for the coffin.

"Of long-standing consumption," the herbalists declared.

She knew a deeper truth.

There is a faded picture, dug up out of somebody's attic. It shows Noralee as she was at her best. She sits triumphant, looking straight ahead, surrounded by six children, not one of them her own. She has a ramrod spine. She keeps her hands demurely in her lap, but there's a sparkle in her eyes.

"No matter," the glitter in her young gaze seems to say. "You salvage what you can."

In this old, faded photograph, she has a slightly rounding belly, and if you check the calendar against the ship list and the birth of her first son, born in the sod near Wichita, a boy whom she would bravely christen Dewey, it being an untested name, you might surmise that Noralee took with her half around the world a prematurely stirring child, her first and Jacob's last, that kicked at her with pious foot soles all the way to Kansas.

# Chapter 10

The Lord, propelled by a mysterious anger, tore Nicky from his destiny and swept him out into the heaving sea—much as Claas Epp, when angered for moot cause, would tear a page from an offending book and fling it in the fire. His widow never had a funeral's somber comfort to come to terms with loss.

After the accident, the Elders told her, hovering: "Out of all evil cometh forth good." She must cling to her Faith, said the preachers.

It took many tears, but of course she complied. She had no other recourse. Her life and love, the caring father of her children, was gone forevermore, washed overboard by a ferocious storm that tried to rip the ship apart and lashed still at the sails. Now she was all alone.

So this was death? This was the end? She felt betrayed and wronged. No relatives to gather in full strength? No preacher at her husband's coffin to remind her she would follow? Just this? A watery grave for the sweetest of life she had known?

She longed to see her Nicky laid to rest in his beloved earth's

warm bosom, next to his father, Peet—both of them one with the soil. For days on end, the wind kept whipping at the waves, as if to pulverize their foam. The captain petitioned for prayers—a rough, foggy voyage, contrary winds all the way.

When finally the pitching ceased, and there were solid planks beneath her feet again—although they hadn't yet reached shore—this preacher, that one would quietly sit next to her, affirming: "Do not despair, for you are yet in God's good hands."

She was helpless with shock. The limitless world she had hoped to share with her husband had turned into a frightening abyss—worse yet, there was no turning back. The steps behind her had been washed away.

"It takes Faith, in the face of disaster," said her friends and companions.

She nodded, but it didn't help. It would be days until her inner storm subsided. At last, a rainbow perched on the horizon, a magnificent, colorful arch.

She thought she had already shed the last of many tears, but now they welled again. She was alone, sailing on a swaying ship bound for a destiny that had no name, a widow with four little children, their faces plump with tears.

"The Lord is mad," wailed Noralee, but Lizzy shook her head.

"No, Noralee. It's not the Lord." She concluded with shivering sinews: the Devil.

She knew from previous training—knew all of it deep in a cold and silent corner of her brain—that it was not the Lord her Master who tried with both His hands to rip the ship apart.

"Why?" shrieked her sister. "Why? Good Lord, just tell me why!"

"I think I know," said Lizzy in the end. She cast a shy glance at the bin. That's what it was—God's kernels. The Devil wanted Nicky's wheat. The emigrant barge, packed seam to seam with eager seekers of new soil, swayed in the wind, a dark and helpless petal. And since the Devil could not cleave his malice unto the golden nuggets still safely in the bin—the Lord had aided her in holding on to it with all her strength while many other crates

washed overboard!—he took her love instead. There was no other explanation. It was a thought, she realized with a small jolt, with the strong, sharp aroma of mint.

When at last the storm subsided, Lizzy sat atop her salvaged bin of grain, her skirts spread over it. She listened patiently to her son's anguished prayers, having gently silenced the tumultuous voices of the girls. She spread her blankets on the floor and watched the young fall into slumber. She stared into the night, in her ears the roll of the sea, in her nostrils the salt of the water.

"He's dead," she thought, but could not grasp the thought. "He's gone, and I am all alone."

She had expected to grow old and limp in Nicky's strong, protective arms. Behind her slept the ship—above her, a distant and glittering ceiling. A chill sat in her marrow. A full moon kept its stealthy pace. At home, the hours struck mindnight—here it was just after nine. How could one gain a head start on the future by turning back the clock?

"Mama," a small voice spoke behind her.

"Yes, Jan?"

"It's you and me, Mama."

At first, she scarcely heard the words. She said mechanically: "Yes, dearest. Yes. I know."

"Mama, if you will let me help—"

She touched her son's warm hand. "I know."

Jan stroked his mother's knee. They sat together wordlessly. At last he said: "You aren't crying any more, Mama?"

"My tears have all been shed."

Her lids were dry as paper, but in her heart sat dread, a cold and clammy toad. She knew eternity was good to all who walked the straight and narrow path: Nicky's place in heaven was assured. That wasn't it; she didn't grieve as those who had no hope because they knew the Savior not. The meaning she searched for was deeper than that, more involved.

"You have your Faith, Mama."

She nodded at the familiar comfort. Nicky's young life had

passed into eternity, a bright and shining star. She knew as well that death held all the answers, but little solace was that now when grief churned deep within her with a surging power all its own.

"Yes, that I do. I thank you for affirming." She dared not ask to understand eternity, for fear of seeming forward. She heard her young son mutter: "Thou who feedeth the fowls in the air, and clotheth with beauty the lilies, hath surely not forsaken me." She cupped her first-born's face and felt a tear squeeze slowly through her fingers.

"Clouds give us rain so grain can grow—"

"I know."

"Storms drive the roots of oak trees deep—"

She heard her husband's favorite proverb as though he sat beside her.

"Why aren't you asleep?"

"I can't sleep either, Mama." Her young son took a struggling breath: "Behind the blackest clouds hide countless twinkling stars—"

She looked at him with gratitude. The words he spoke had long been anchors for her folk. She knew that she must live by them, the proven, tested proverbs of her creed, but in her clammy heart she knew as well: "He's gone, he's dead, and I am all alone."

"Jan, listen—"

He took her hand into his own in a proprietary manner: "I will make sure you have the finest home. The lushest land. The strongest trees." And, with a small and tender smile: "The fattest cows, Mama."

She bonded with her son that night. She loved all of her children more than life, but now she knew she would look up to Jan.

The storms were not yet done. Again, the ship began careening, a nutshell on a crest.

Swollen with new life—and too much food consumed in the excitement of the voyage—Noralee thought that she would surely

die. She wrapped herself around a handy railing and spit up peas, pork, bits of stock fish—and someone young and strong, smelling of hoeing and plowing, was carefully holding her head.

"Hold on, now, Noralee. Hold on!"

The ship was upright now, then leaning on its side, creaking in its joints. Bags and suitcases, bundles and baskets kept sliding up and down the planks.

"Hold onto me, Noralee! Hold on! There, now! Good girl!"

She wept with shame that this young male she scarcely knew had seen her retch as though she were a glutton. His fingertips cradled her temples. She couldn't help but see, albeit through her tears: here came an opportunity. Here stood a young but hardy fellow, not in the least put off by nature's purging ways. So why not ride the crest of drama, since there was nothing else to do? She felt her armpits going wet with nausea. "I'm dying! Am I dying?"

He peppered her with many questions. "Do you feel better now? Just one more heave? Good girl!"

He laughed until his whiskers shook—and she? She heaved once more and leaned against him shakily and knew she had come home.

His blue eyes matched her own. She knew that he would be her man, that he would forge her rules.

'Here. Try my fire water."

She took a sip straight from his flask. Strong stuff! It made her tongue sting and her throat contract. It was like biting heartily into a pickled gherkin.

"Ah! Ah! That's good! What is it?"

"It's vodka, little goose. Here. Swallow hard. There now! Another heave? Don't you feel better now?"

"I think so," Noralee agreed, and knew she was in love.

She understood, of course, the interest that lay beneath his charity. She was not deceived—no silly cuckoo she. Yet all the same, a surge of youth and opportunity rushed to her fingertips and toes, which seemed improper and untimely, as though Jacob had never existed.

"I thank you. Right from the bottom of my heart," said Noralee, now mindful of her manners.

The stranger was a godsend from the start. He brought her youth and strength. Death had stood for so long behind her aging husband—and when it came, at last, she did what any woman would have done: she splashed his face with water—did that help him? No. He passed away, obligingly, amid his many pills and bottles.

This youth beside her, twice her size and solid as the old oak tree of Chortitza, now said to her, repeatedly: "Here. Have another sip."

"If you won't tell the Elders," she giggled shakily.

"If you won't either," said the man, and clasped her to himself.

She wasn't anybody's fool; she knew she voyaged to a country thick with intellectuals and Jews. She forced a lump of nausea down once more and told the young man resolutely: "You look familiar to me."

"I do?"

She leaned toward him gingerly. She calculated quickly. Six children slept beneath the bow on plain plank beds, and her belly was arching again. This man looked young enough to have his pick—she'd better be prepared. Just as a town must have a railroad, so, too, a girl must have a man.

"You do. Where are you from?"

"From Alexanderwohl."

"What is your name, if I may ask?"

"My name is Johann Janzen. But everybody calls me Doctorjay, for I set broken bones."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Doctorjay," said Noralee, still struggling for composure. "I take it that you know of Apanlee? I come from the vicinity."

So what if his nose ended in a pimple? Her knees knocked together a bit.

Throughout some fifty years of married life, Noralee would never cease to feel for Doctorjay an ardent admiration.

He came and helped when she needed it most. He stood and watched her cleanse herself; he did not back away. This was the fondest memory she cherished from the voyage: that sturdy, wholesome hand, those tufts of hair on hardy farmer's knuckles, that reached for her and steered her to the railing.

"Doctorjay, I'm glad you helped me with that flask," she told him now, resolved to make the most of luck and opportunity.

"It's good stuff, isn't it?" he smiled.

"But don't you think you better hide it? Now?" The Elders had sharp eyes. "We'll both be punished, in this world and the next."

"I'll empty it first to your health," he said gallantly, bending an elbow, on his lips a merry laugh.

"A Brethren you are?" She better make sure.

He chuckled. "Well. No. Not exactly."

"You're not?" Her eyes were round as saucers.

"Not quite."

"If you don't go to church, I'll read you the *Leviticus.* With laxity, I can be sterner than a preacher."

"I am a German of the Lutheran persuasion."

She pondered that a bit, while he kept watching her alertly.

"So what," she told herself. "There's always a chance to convert." This was a friend of merit. Here was a man with the familiar look, the homely smell she craved. He made her heart pound like a hammer.

"Once born a Lutheran, always a Lutheran. Is that the truth or not?"

Was that an answer or a question? Was he now teasing her? She kept surveying him beneath her lowered lashes. She liked things cut and crisp.

"I go to church," he said while guessing at her thoughts, "like everybody else."

"Is that a fact?"

She pondered carefully. Chances were he said his prayers;

and chances were, he had no fear of bathing. The waves that rocked the ship were rocking them both. "I am a widow, don't you know?"

"Here is my arm. Hang onto me," he laughed.

She grabbed it resolutely. Too soon, she guessed, he would find out about the children that were now hers to raise until they scattered—though, luckily, they slumbered at this moment and could not interfere. Had they been romping underfoot, she might have lost this opportunity.

"Well, then?" she pushed coquettishly. She tilted her chin just a bit. Life was a game of chess. So what if her belly was rounding!

"Doctorjay, tell me the truth. Have I not seen your face before?"

"I might just be your long-lost kin," he told her softly, pressing his advantage, while yielding to the pitching and the heaving of the ship. "You might have seen me. Off and on, I worked at Apanlee. A field hand, you might say."

"Could be."

He pulled in a gulp of smoke and blew it artfully back through his nostrils. "To me, you look familiar, too. You look as though you have been raised on sour cream and cherries."

When she heard that, she was convinced that she had died and gone to heaven. Sheer poetry!

"That is a comely coat you wear," said he, a lavish man, and laughed so that his belly shook. "One of these days, I'd like to help you with your buttons."

Impertinence! Audacity! The ship was pitching her from one horizon to the other. "What's this? Amusing me with flattery? Where are your manners, Doctorjay? You assume that a woman comes easy?"

"He suits me well in all respects," she reported to Lizzy at once.

"I'm glad, Noralee," said her sorrowing sister, her thoughts still far away. "He seems a very nice man."

"He is. I know that for a fact."

She was resolved to settle into marriage just as a fox might settle, having found a hollow tree. She leaned upon the railing, adding softly: "He may not look it, to be sure, and may not even act it, Lizzy, but I know deep down in my heart he is a very pious man."

"That is just wonderful," said Lizzy.

"When he accepts our Lord and Savior, he will surrender all that's Lutheran."

"Has he proposed already?"

"Not yet. Not yet."

"He is a little younger than you are?

"A mere ten years."

"Ten years? Now, listen, Noralee—"

"If you must know—eleven."

"Eleven!"

"So what?" said Noralee. "My aim is, first and last, to please."

Her sister probed: "How old is Doctorjay? Speak up and tell the truth."

"Eighteen."

"What? You are almost twice his age!"

"That's right. Eighteen. Not that it matters, Lizzy. I know that he sets bones, pulls teeth and bleaches freckles. And charges a set fee."

Before she settled down with Doctorjay, she set herself to the compelling task of helping Lizzy cut her mourning time in half. Doctorjay, who never left her side, was of enormous aid in that endeavor from the start, for Lizzy's benefit dispensing healing counsel: "After you are done with grieving, Lizzy, you will be plump and rosy once again."

"Oh, never! Never!" Lizzy sorrowed, numbed head to foot with shock but sensing his good will.

"Oh, yes. You will," said Doctorjay. "You have the courage of a soldier. I never saw a braver woman."

Both Noralee and Doctorjay would tell her every day: "We've

stormed heaven with our prayers. If even half are answered, you have some miracles in store."

They never left her side. They sat with her throughout the voyage, exchanging little pleasantries. They walked her back and forth to make sure melancholy didn't settle in her joints.

Assorted Elders bolstered this crusade, studying their prayer books to arrive at timely solutions: "And meanwhile, Lizzy dear, the ancient Faith. The tested rules. Your Savior is your shield."

No, she was not alone. The pious passengers all stood behind her with a tender constancy so she could ripen in her Faith and walk from doubt to certainty.

Yet she was human, too.

"I know that Sundays will be hardest," Lizzy whispered wretchedly, though bolstered from all sides.

"We'll all come visiting early and stay throughout the day," said Doctorjay.

"You will?"

"Of course. Come Sunday in America—why, you can do whatever strikes your fancy. Stay in bed. Nurse a headache. Eat all the pickles that you want. That is America for you. No matter what the distance, Lizzy—we'll all come early and stay late. Good neighbors here as there."

She smiled a wistful smile that stole into his heart. She might be senseless with her loss—she spared no pains to make herself agreeable. "I want your promise, Doctorjay, that you and Noralee will homestead next to me."

He blurted out, his ears aflame, a daring man who overstepped ten thousand boundaries: "I promise you. Here is my handshake, Lizzy."

"A stroke of luck," she said, a genial woman, "put you right in my way."

His heart leaped to his lips: "Fair weather or foul, I'll always be your friend." He stared at her, enthralled. That was America for you! This woman came from Apanlee where he had been an extra hand at the potato harvest. "You don't mean half of what you say?"

"Of course I do." Such joy careening in his head! Now he began to understand: democracy! That was the secret code—as robust as the scent of the earth after plowing.

She spoke with firm simplicity. "Where we are going, Doctorjay, there will be need of friends."

He answered in a sweeping bow. His heartbeat—in a whirl! Not for ten thousand kingdoms would he have traded in this moment. He knew not what to say.

She watched him thoughtfully. She knew, a refined woman: a bond had formed between her and this common man with pockmarks on his cheeks and all the grime of Russia still clinging to his heels.

He sensed it, too. It hushed him. His blood sang in three octaves when he stood next to Noralee, but Lizzy touched him in a way no woman ever touched his heart before or ever would again. Had he not been so clumsy, he would have kissed her shadow. Before her dainty feet he spread his fleshy heart.

"You are a fine diplomatist," instead he muttered awkwardly, the ocean's salt drops stinging his eyes and his nose.

She turned and tensed her shoulders, her gaze on the emerald sea. He took off his hat, then put it on again. He couldn't speak for several hours; he was that overcome.

Noralee beamed her approval at the exchange that started mending Lizzy's grief. There was no jealousy in her. Her sister was no rival to her hopes. A blind man would have seen why Doctorjay had chosen Noralee.

She noticed even on the ship that he, in deference to her superior age, had camouflaged his youth, in case she noticed and objected, by stiffening his mustache with a special kind of wax that he had cleverly invented.

"Here's to your health, dear Noralee. Longevity, of course," he told her, smiling slyly.

She asked no further proof.

He gave her lively, penetrating looks. He looked as though he carried firecrackers in his pockets.

"Where we are going, Noralee, open loving is freely allowed. I have that from good sources."

"Why, poison oak itch on both nostrils!" she giggled, overcome. "What are you hinting at? I do not understand."

Of course she understood. She collected her wits just in time.

She knew the treasure that he coveted; might he be bold enough to strip before his wife? The thought was too dreadful to finish. Her pulse was throbbing with all sorts of possibilities. Here was a bold and daring man who stood, enraptured, at her elbow. Both understood each other perfectly, for what he valued in a horse, he also valued in a woman—those tell-tale shivers rippling down her spine, collecting in his palm.

# Chapter 11

Missy, nicknamed Little Melly, was barely six years old in 1874. She was the third of Jacob's six young orphans whom Noralee had taken over to be raised in trusted Faith when Jacob passed to his reward. She stood as close to Jan, a boy twelve years of age, as modesty allowed.

Protectively, he put both arms around her slender frame so that she wouldn't slip in her excitement and fall into the sea.

"See? See?"

"I see. I see," she echoed happily, as wholesome as baked apple.

Both watched with eager eyes. Straight chimneys rose as if by magic. The sun shone bright and clear. The ship coursed forward like an arrow. The sailors scurried up the masts. The water foamed with spring.

Jan was in all respects a sprout of Apanlee—his dreams came early, lingered long. Wheels within wheels were turning in his mind.

"I have it from good sources that, in America, most anything

is possible."

When he touched Little Melly's hair—as he did even on the ship, for he was generous with touch—the sun was sparkling in his eyes. When Little Melly smiled at Jan—right through the gap where baby teeth had been—the timbre of the harpsichords chimed in: "Here is the key. It will open the door to my heart."

She leaned against him gingerly: with Jan, most anything was possible—although real miracles were rare.

Let no one call it puppy love. The uninformed might say: mere children. Minor minions. She knew that she would marry Jan—she who had known him since the cradle. She had the proper qualities. She knew how to blend in harmoniously.

Whatever he wished to learn on a subject, he found out. What she wished to remember, he taught her.

The time-worn rules had carved their faces so that they looked like siblings. Behind them stood the weight of centuries. The ancient Faith ran in their blood. It wrote the script; some things were understood as though they had been carved on slabs of rock that Moses brought down Sinai. There was a master plan.

They were each other's shadow.

Now she sighed softly, stirring against him, knowing in the center of her being that this boy—freckled skin, red hair and penetrating eyes—would always be smack in the center of her world.

Little Melly's aim in life was first and last to please. Even on the ship as it reached shore and dropped its anchor, Little Melly knew with certainty that, come what may, she would grow up and melt into the noble duties. She would perfect the qualities a woman must possess—foremost thrift, patience and embroidery. Her wisdom issued from the Bible.

Jan knew that he would grow into a man of potent strength who, duties done, would then sleep sound, in his nostrils the scent of the bountiful earth.

Under her guidance, his prayers would reach high perfection. As judged by his approval, so would her *pfefferniisse.*

Little Melly was, of course, a Brethren child and, therefore,

born and bred to peace and to conformity, and she was pious to the backbone. Behind Jan stood his ancestry, known for its friction with the Elders and for some views of certain risk. But you could tell: she would not let him run from church to church; she would grow up to memorize the points of dispute between the Brethren and the Lutherans pertaining to the Trinity and help him see them, too. She would point out to him at every opportunity: "See? See those markers all around you?" He might test this and that, since Peet's agnostic spirit peeked out from his blue stare in flashes, but in the end, he would give in.

She knew it. He did, too.

Together, they made an astonishing couple. Their faces bore a message, etched there by centuries: not reckless with tradition are we.

Tradition was what walked ashore! Tradition walked ashore as though it wore silvery spurs.

"This is my land," cried Doctorjay with stark emotion. "Lord God, this is my land."

And Noralee! She gasped with reverence. She rolled her round, blue eyes. She fell in with the shouts of fellow passengers: "America! America!"

She would have taken off her shoes, had she not known her left sock had a hole—a small one, to be sure, but woefully at a strategic point where no one could have missed it.

"Don't yelp," said Doctorjay, a gallant man, protective of her image.

She quickly checked her voice but cheered the coast no less enthusiastically by clapping. She knew that everything was difficult in the beginning, but He would hold her upright in her Faith, and in the meantime, she would do her share—day-in, day-out—just give her a small chance!

"Goodness only knows what might be on your mind," she told the man who held her elbow firmly and guided her ashore in blinding daylight as though she were a queen and he a nobleman. "Let's say you were to marry me the moment we arrive?"

"That thought has crossed my mind," replied the Lutheran, while warming to the challenge.

She arched away from him in coy retaliation. "Why, Doctorjay! Why, thumbscrews on your thoughts!"

She was no fool. She read his eager blood.

"We'll leave the future up to Providence," he told her teasingly. "Let things evolve. As you so often say, the Lord shall be in charge."

She had no quarrel with that thought. The Lord would always be in charge, but she would help; she had ambitious plans. She knew of Lizzy's pledge to own the fattest cow. She knew that Lizzy's son had plans to grow from just a single calf a model, exemplary herd. She was a woman generous of heart; she would leave raising cows to Lizzy who needed every benefit to help her past her grief.

Let Lizzy have her cows! She, Noralee, would concentrate on fowl.

She would make sure she owned the fattest geese, the plumpest ducks, the hardiest chickens, all housed securely in the sturdiest chicken coop.

That was a decade that saw many walk to shore down swaying board walks, children and baggage in hand, throwing their bundles and bedding. Some couples carried hassocks between them. Some hefted their belongings on their shoulders, or pulled them with a rope.

Noralee headed the throng, Doctorjay at her side. She was so eager for the future she nearly lost a shoe.

She funneled her children through customs, willingly moving when given a shove. She opened her mouth and stuck out her tongue to let it be inspected for diseases.

"A clean bill of health, Doctorjay."

"Same here! Same here, Noralee!"

"Not married yet?" asked the official, catching the romantic drift.

"Not yet," said Noralee. "But he pulls teeth. Sets bones.

And charges a set fee."

"Name?"

"Janzen."

"Spell it."

"Whichever way you please," said Doctorjay, accommodatingly. "It matters not to me."

"Well, let me help you, then. Your name is Jensen now!" Plunk! went the rubber stamp.

The bonesetter stared at his new name, enthralled, then threw his knapsack with aplomb across a rusted railing and, steering Noralee along two narrow planks, with ringing voice commenced to sing:

*"A mighty fortress is our God—"*

When he did that, all her worries fell away. The dread of disapproval melted. Lutheran or not, he was a pious man; he knew the hymns; the deacons would not be aghast.

"*—a bulwark never failing—*" boomed Doctorjay, as loudly as he could, thus warding off the hazards of America.

She started beaming radiantly, as though she owned a factory of beams.

"*Our helper He, amid the flood, of mortal ills prevailing,*" sang Noralee, in harmony, thus nullifying Satan's plots.

*"For still our ancient foe*
*doth seek to work us woe—"*

Their voices became magnets. The fellow passengers joined in. They formed a circle all around her and the Lutheran: the Lord must have His bidding:

*"The prince of darkness grim,*
*We tremble not for him.*
*His rage we can endure,*
*for lo, his doom is sure:*
*One little word shall fell him."*

Ah, but how good it felt to sing that ancient song, united, to a voice! Their voices blended swiftly and rose straight to the clouds.

*"That word above all earthly powers,*
*No thanks to them, abideth.*

*The Spirit and the gifts are ours*
*Through Him who with us sideth."*

It would take many hymns, they knew. It would take grit. Endurance. Vigor. It would take vigilance.

*"Let goods and kindred go,*
*This mortal life also.*
*The body they may kill;*
*God's truth abideth still—*
*His kingdom is for-ehe-he-ver!"*

It would take stamina to cling together as an ethnic group amid the Witches' Sabbath that whirled around them now, while somewhere, in the distance, there played a Russian *balalaika.*

How odd it was to speak and not be understood!

The new arrivals peered about them timidly but nonetheless with curious glances. The city swarmed with Yiddish-speaking characters—as many as hairs on a dog—with beards like beehives, prominent noses, their gestures unrestrained.

Two foppish men swung hips as though they were mere women.

A panhandler feigned a decided limp.

A slut leaned haughtily against a post and courted customers.

They stood and struggled to believe. No manners in America? No Cossacks to keep order?

Life here seemed raw and crude. They felt a lively horror. No doubt the law was broad! The people pushed and shoved. The glut of ash cans cluttered all the sidewalks, overflowing. Where could you cut a broom to sweep? How could you counteract the lure of the forbidden?

The Russian-German immigrants side-stepped the city's refuse by going single-file, one close on the heels of another, while choraling their antidotes:

*"Did we in our own strength confide,*
*Our striving would be losing;*
*Were not the right man on our side,*
*The man of God's own choosing."*

*"Dost ask who that may be?*
*Christ Jesus, it is He.*
*Lord Sabaoth His name,*
*From age to age the same,*
*And He must win the ba-ha-hattle."*

Thus were the ethnic demarcation lines drawn early. They were uncompromising, even then—even a man like Doctorjay, a field hand only yesterday who, nonetheless, stood firmly in his *schlorren,* who had arrived, his need for land an exclamation mark, who was a Lutheran and would remain a Lutheran despite ten dozen well-planned sieges in coming years by both his wife and the persistent Brethren deacons. All knew that it would take the Narrow Path. The Ancient Faith. The stubborn conduct taken in with mother's milk and sculpted carefully by timeless generations.

*"—and though this world with devils filled,*
*Should threaten to undo us,*
*We will not fear, for God hath willed*
*His truth to triumph through us—"*

"Look! Look!" squealed Little Melly.

"It's just a Negro, kid." The customs official spoke kindly. "He really won't do you no harm."

"He's black! He's black as the night!" shrieked the child.

"A skin disorder," the all-knowing bonesetter said.

Little Melly ran howling for cover.

# Chapter 12

The Santa Fe agents, furtive men with speedy tongues, had promised Nicky through the scouts while still at Apanlee: "Cheap acres. Free homes. Free passes to buyers of land." Loudly had they praised this stretch of land and that, while Nicky sat, entranced, believing every word. "A fortune can be earned," these men had bragged, about them the fumes of tobacco, "with hard work, diligence and thrift."

A bait it was—this claim of milk and honey!

Now they were long gone, and so was Lizzy's money; she had only two dollars left, in a jar. Here she sat, on a dented pail, in the middle of a pancake land so level that her glance could not attach to anything—afloat in a sea made of weeds.

"What will the future hold? Why did we come?" She gasped with agitation.

"To seek a new life, Mother," said Jan, and gently stroked her knee. "To break the prairie sod."

Unbidden tears collected in her nose. "A life of toil and trouble."

She started pouring out her woes; of them, there was no end. She needed a hatchet, a spade and a hoe. She had none. No field hand. No credit. When the creaking of the cartwheels died away, she was left in a rickety, ramshackle hut.

"We'll make it. Don't you fret."

She saw nothing but high reeds and sky. The grass was a layer of felt. A man whose name was Donoghue—a crook with an elastic conscience!—had traded his debts in exchange for the roof that was hers now, but did her no good; it sagged like an old mattress in the middle, and it already needing thatching.

"Yes, Mother." Jan dug his toes into the soil. "But look at it this way: Once it starts raining—and it will!—the weeding will be easy. No stones to cart away."

"A thief! Took to his heels," she said to her son, suppressing her panic. "Before I had a chance to think it over and tell him that I changed my mind—before I said, we'll turn around; tomorrow we'll go back—"

"We can't go back. We've come to stay. We'll do the best we can."

She dropped her head. "But how will we survive?"

It was a shack, no more, this edifice she must call home—just walls of sod, with spiders everywhere, and cracks in every corner. Scraggly doves had flown in through a broken window, nesting inside, leaving messes on the sills.

"In Wichita they pay a nickel for a gopher's tail. I've already set five traps. That's going to give us some cash. We'll buy a dozen chickens. they can feed on the bugs in the grass."

"Once we have chickens —"

"—why, we'll have eggs."

"And once we have eggs—"

"—we'll trade them for money."

"And once we have money—"

"I'll buy you a cow."

A cow? She tried to smile, but her heart was a boulder—a boulder the size of a mountain. At Apanlee, she could have called a hundred cows her own and never given it a thought. No one

had ever claimed she was a lavish dreamer—but this? One cow? One single gloomy cow?

"The fattest cow around, Mama."

She longed to pull him to her bosom but knew it was too late. His childhood, too, went overboard that dark and stormy night. She thought her heart would break as she beheld his future. Behind a broken kitchen window, nothing lay but little drifts of brittle leaves—nothing but a home for foxes, badgers, prairie hens and meadow larks! This place was to harbor her kin? A wretched sod house, dug down several feet, windows flush against the soil? Could this ever be a home, thin-walled, smelly, drafty, naught but old newspapers to stick in the cracks?

Her voice gave way. "No end to empty space—"

"We'll make it, Mama. Be assured."

"We cannot even buy a spade—"

"In ten years' time," her son said, guessing at her thoughts, "you'll have five hundred cows."

"But how—"

"I'll find a way. I heard talk of miracle reapers this morning." His forearms were covered with scratches. "A mere few years, Mama. That's all we need. You'll see."

She said with a small sob: "No streets. No lights. No borders."

The wind blew with fat cheeks and swept debris around the house. It tore open the door and whirled some shreds of paper she had stuck in the cracks. She flinched as if struck in the face.

"Let's call it Mennotown—" He knelt at her knees and took her fingertips with gentle hands. "It's the end of autumn. Everything looks desolate. It will be different once spring is here again." He spoke comfortingly: "Sunflowers grow the length of the Santa Fe trail—"

"Dry and barren. Desolate."

"Rich land. Good soil. Wheat sells for fifty cents a bushel. I dug three feet and found no change in moisture. We'll use the rails to beat out and sharpen our plows."

"Nary a forsaken soul for many miles on end."

"No gossip," her son said, suppressing a small smile. "No quarrelsome neighbors. Not counting Noralee."

She could not have enough of his young confidence. "We'll be so lonely here—"

"They'll come. You'll see. They'll flock to us as if we lived at Apanlee. We talked about it yesterday, the other men and I. We'll help each other clean the harvests. From birth to burial, Mama, you know that a farmer always has friends."

She glanced at her son as he knelt before her, looking set and stubborn and resilient in his rugged pants and wooden shoes. She saw it suddenly, the uncanny likeness.

"Your jaw. Your eyes. You look like your grandfather Peet."

Tears filled her own and blurred her vision. She could have stayed at Apanlee. She thought her heart would stop, remembering the ready wealth of Apanlee. Yet even then she knew: the die was cast. The Lord's work must continue. With Peet's and Greta's children's children it would continue, on and on, and with their children's children. She fell silent, thinking of the man whose eyes and deeds still dominated Apanlee. She tried to hide that she was crying, but he saw.

"You have your prayers. You have your ancient hymnbook, Mama, that Uncle Benny gave you—"

Yes, that she did. God's promises were with her still, the German sounds bound in the finest Russian leather, lying atop her precious crate of wheat.

"This is your country now," she said, and dutifully dried her tears. "For your birthday next Sunday, I give you this land—" A mother's heart must break that she had nothing else to give him. She was flushing with painful surrender. "You will be an American," she said, to add a tiny pittance more.

"I thank you, Mother," said the boy. "I'll put your chest of drawers in the middle, between those two small windows over there—"

"Not yet—" A mother's heart might break: the work must still be done. "Where is my gunny sack? Let me gather some buffalo chips for a fire—"

Life must go on. The seasons would rotate. She took a trembling breath. In a shy gesture, she folded her hands on her belly. She was already making plans. She would ask Doctorjay to help her make a cradle from a packing box, for she hoped fervently that this new baby, Nicky's last, born to this waste and stretch of misery not found on any map, would be a child of golden hair and clear blue eyes and dimples in both buttocks.

The story is told of difficult days, wearisome days—of living on the margin.

And yet. A bygone world—the simple warmth of those pioneer years! You hoped for better times much as you hoped for kindness from the seasons—but meanwhile, you made sure. Your homestead—bare and poor, but clean! Your lifestyle—stainless likewise.

Blessed were those days when life was stark but orderly and those who sowed with tears—as Lizzy did in the beginning, though not for long; she came of hardy stock!—knew they would reap with joy.

The harvests brought together strangers and made them loyal friends. Lizzy's gates creaked back and forth as people came to visit from afar. Both she and Noralee vied for congenial neighbors and courted them with zwieback—the Friesens, the Ensens, the Reimers, the Dycks—all bringing their spindles, their grandfather clocks, all clutching their boxes and bedding, settling around them on farms with good soil.

They all were remarkable people.

In the decade to come, thousands arrived in their eddying throngs, to lay claim to the warmth that was Kansas. They came in pious droves, driving off the Indians, settling firmly with their wooden spoons and samovars and Bibles.

"A haughty, stubborn sect," wrote the *Emporia Gazette,* "have set their faces westwards." The locomotives slipped and stalled on locusts; the pious creed moved on. By midnight, the locusts were gone; the pioneers would stay.

Proud children of pioneer stock, their skirts and their trousers

un-ironed, their voices blending well, they all flocked to the promised land, and where they settled, one by one, they multiplied and prospered. They staked their land claims, side by side, thus forging ever stronger kinship ties that bound them more firmly than wheat twine.

They dug a hole and sniffed the soil and crumbled it between their fingers. They drew their lots out of a pail and settled in their little villages, made of adobe blocks and twigs. Abhorring war, they all made sure their children would do likewise. They promised they would rotate crops as they had done in Russia.

"Let's watch," wrote the *Emporia Gazette*, "how they give our prairie a dressing of wheat—"

"Fat soil," they said. "We'll work like ants and bees."

But no one was deceived. It was a bleak beginning yet, somehow, life went on.

"It's time to plow," said Jan. "Before we do, let's bow our heads and pray." Jan was the kind that saw God face to face, the kind who plucked His beard. Strong prayers would force rain. If rain delayed, the fault was in the prayers.

"Yes. Let's."

Conversing with the Lord, by contrast, was balmy ritual for Lizzy, the wellspring of renewal, not needing further thought.

Her Faith was the ritualized Faith of her clan.

"He maketh lightning for the rain," she read each evening. "He bringeth wind out of his treasuries. Meanwhile, we are what we are. We do what we can."

She stood within a wondrous spell, with her confinement drawing near. Her son was ever at her side and ever within call.

She was of the old school, resisting hardship with proper deportment. Though she could barely walk, she pushed her shoulder to the wheel and shoved, like everybody else. She would let no one know that still, at night, she lay awake, crying softly to herself while dreaming of the safe and warm world known as Apanlee, hidden from view, as though in perpetual haze.

"Fat awns, the size of my finger," Jan told his mother confidently. "I bet you. You'll see. I dreamed of a bountiful harvest last night."

"I dreamed about it, too," said Lizzy loyally. "A sea of rolling wheat."

"He'll send us rain. You'll see."

"He will," she echoed faithfully. How could the Lord refuse? Why, with an outstretched arm, He would bless Nicky's wheat and help Jan bind the sheaves.

A dry heat settled on the prairie. The rains refused to come.

The wind blew every cloud past the horizon. The water pump stood sweaty, and still—it did not rain.

Jan's oxen, stubborn beasts of tedious speed, pulled doggedly. His plow tore deep into the earth. His toes sat squarely and possessively within fat strips of broken crust, preparing confidently for his first harvest.

When a belated prairie preacher chanced, his book of devotions pinned under his arm, that was a sign from heaven. Any preacher was seen as a treat—you helped him fortify his voice as he beseeched the Lord to let the seasons march agreeably. The people watched, intrigued and mesmerized, as he climbed eagerly onto a make-shift table so he could better check on how the faithful bowed their heads.

"Thou causeth the grass for the cattle," he shouted.

They helped him chorus to a voice: "Thou bringeth forth fruit from the earth."

The sun burned the buffalo grass to a crisp. The sky hung pale and milky. The wind blew with fat cheeks. And still, it didn't rain.

More prayers, therefore! More!

It took a week and lots of shouting, but in the end, the wails won out. The prayers won the struggle.

The sky dropped down near the earth, a gray, comforting blanket. The bushes stirred. The roosters scurried for cover. Soft, scented drops began to fall. Creeks and rivers filled to overflow-

ing.

"Now strew your wheat, Mama. Like so. One handful in alternate rows."

She threw gold, just as far as she could. For bounty would come, she was sure. It had to come. It was promised to her. This was not just Faith; it was also a matter of logic. If this grain spoiled, there was none to replace it. The only thing between her and disaster was Faith.

Hence, Lizzy filled herself with Faith. She practically ballooned with Faith.

"The worst is surely behind me, Lord?" she prayed. "The rest is up to you?" Blue smoke curled jauntily toward the sky as Lizzy sped her Faith to heaven. Nobody caught her napping.

She kept reminding Him at every opportunity that the price had already been paid when her husband washed into the ocean. Each day was a new test.

She rose early. She watched the sun rise over her hut.

"Let Thy work appear in Thy servants," she prayed. "Establish the work of our hands."

And she was right. Faith saved the seed. The earth shone like a polished rock. Sweet birdsong filled the heavens. After the long-awaited rain, each carefully selected grain struck tender root that week. She watched how Nicky's grain broke sod with green and pointed tips.

# Chapter 13

By late summer, the grain stood so high that it brushed across Jan's broadening chest. He glowed with health and strength. He harvested with care. He swung the scythe with careful strokes, then threshed with flails by candlelight while Little Melly watched. She was his loyal shadow. She seldom spoke a word. Jan scooped her up and put her on a bed of straw left over from the threshing.

"Don't wake her, Mom," he said to Lizzy. "She can go home tomorrow."

Already she belonged. He found an extra blanket with which to cover her.

He climbed into the loft. It was awkward to sleep amid spiders and beams, but Jan preferred his solitude; it was no longer proper to share the sleeping quarters with his sisters and his mother as he had done before they reached the plains.

"We're winning. Aren't we?" he called down from above.

"Yes, son," said Lizzy softly. "Good night, dear. We're winning. I dream of double winter window frames."

Her trust in Jan was absolute. She knew that he slept soundly always, a hard day's work cooling and solidifying in his bones, like molten gold.

She didn't sleep as well. For many nights, she tossed and turned. She listened to the Santa Fe that rumbled through the night.

Her neighbor down the winding road, a widower named Herbert Krahn, who owned a pair of oxen, traded a week of help for Lizzy's mending skills so Jan could take the harvest all the way to Wichita.

"Yoo-hoo!" her helpful neighbor yelled.

"Yoo-hoo!" Jan shouted back and laughed and waved his cap.

"Don't be so forward, son," said Lizzy, coloring.

"Mama, he waved at you," was her son's sly reply.

"You are mistaken. Surely."

"He offered help."

"He did?"

"He did."

"I wonder why he did."

"I can't imagine, Mama."

At dusk, when all the work was done, Herbert would often discuss the odd, fickle weather with Jan. His thoughts were slow but thorough. Words fell between long, awkward pauses. He had huge hands, a ruddy face, a tranquil personality. "If all you need is extra help, just ask," he offered, avoiding Lizzy's eyes.

"He offered help," Jan said, when yet another week was gone. "Did you notice the twine where buttons should have been?"

"You say he offered help?"

"He did. He surely did."

"How did he say it? Be specific."

"He spoke in generalities. He said he would be glad to help."

"Well, if he did, he did."

"That's right, he did," said Jan, and said no more, knowing when to keep his counsel.

Herbert came to mend a pail. He came to bring a greeting from someone who passed by. Soon, he found several additional excuses.

"I praise your charitable qualities," said Herbert shyly, meaning Lizzy, watching Jan.

When a prairie fox sneaked into Lizzy's chicken coop, she wept with anger and vexation while picking the bloody feathers up off the floor. That was the night when Herbert sat up, stealthily—all through the night! a second and a third!—and caught the thief, just as she knew he would. Barehanded, he throttled the fox, proudly handing Lizzy the carcass while wiping his hands on his trousers.

She flung it in the bushes and wiped her hands and laughed.

"No family?" she asked.

"All grown," said Herbert slowly. "All grown, and farming east and north."

He sat and watched an ant. She joined him on the steps. He puffed his pipe. She offered he could stay for dinner. He helped with this and that, avoiding Lizzy's eyes.

Herbert was a model citizen. If someone needed help, his name was on all lips. The dogs rushed out to greet him.

She urged him on at every opportunity: "Eat. Eat. Now eat before that dish gets cold and loses all its flavor."

In gratitude, he fixed her broken water pump and made it good as new.

Soon, she grew used to him. He sharpened hoes and fixed a spade and dug deep holes to plant some trees to give her added shade.

Thanks to his ingenuity, she owned six tripod chairs, a bench, a table, and a rack for seven pots and pans. She was the envy of her neighbors.

"Your peppernuts. Magnificent," said Herbert.

"It wasn't my own recipe." She spoke with downcast lashes. "I borrowed it. That's all."

"Well. All the same. They're excellent."

If she as much as turned around, he laid on lavish praise. That made her beam. Yes, she stood proud. Proud and accomplished, that was Lizzy. Her walls soon glistened with white paint. Her floors were laid with packed mud, mixed with enough chopped straw as binder, then sprinkled with water, swept three times a day. She had a home now, poor but clean. Less and less, she thought of Apanlee.

Such love as came to her and Herbert Krahn while doing virgin homesteading came gently. It felt like a hummingbird's wing. She barely noticed it.

"It is too soon," said Lizzy to her son who wrestled with the sheaves and gave her pensive looks. Her heart was quiet, embedded in ashes; it cried out not for Herbert as it cried out for Nicky, who was dead.

"Marriage to a good and honest man," said her expedient sister, borrowing her words as though she still sat next to Uncle Benny, "is like a fanciful daguerreotype inserted in a frame."

Lizzy tried to hide her feelings from her sister, but in her heart she knew: she needed Herbert Krahn. He needed Lizzy Neufeld. Why not? she asked herself.

She asked around. The things she learned were heartening.

He was a careful penny-pincher, his debts already paid. He was a good, kind, helpful man; he would make an excellent father. Jan needed help—he liked Herb; Herb liked the boy. Jan planned a new barn at a sharp angle to the house, just like the barn at Apanlee. "What do you think?" asked Jan.

"I think you ought to use the lumber from the Santa Fe," said Herbert. At every opportunity, he gave advice and counsel. There was goodwill between them. The girls were girls—too young to have an opinion.

As often as was needed, Herb lent a helping hand. He was as peaceful as a vessel that rode at anchor at a port. Together, he and Jan made many detailed sketches. They talked of this and that.

Much work was waiting to be done. Next week, the plan was to start stacking sheaves. Then came the threshing. Next came the sacking of the grain—most destined for the mills in Wichita, a little kept back for the horses.

Lizzy pushed on forward: there was no denying the obvious. Everything she saw and all she checked confirmed the wisdom of her course. She needed a man to honor and obey. He needed a wife. A wife was the crown of her husband.

As soon as Noralee surmised what Lizzy contemplated, she barely smothered several piercing shrieks—she was that jubilant.

"It is too soon," begged Lizzy, scarlet. "Hold back on gossip, please."

Noralee's eyes opened wide with the excitement of it all. "It's never too soon, Lizzy! Never!"

"Oh, hush," said Lizzy. "What are you saying? Whatever do you mean?"

"I saw you pat his horse."

"I stroked a fly away. That's all. Please. Mention that to no one."

Not in the least was her sister deceived. "There's Greta Unruh waiting. She has her eye on him."

"Greta? No! You must be mistaken. Not Greta! Surely not!"

"You draw your own conclusions."

Lizzy might as well have tried to stop a mountain spring, for Noralee, brimful and practically propelled with joyful tidings, could hold still no longer. She ran to tell Greta. Then Neta. Next Holly. And Susie and Katie and Nan.

Lizzy sat, guiltily peeling potatoes. Caution was called for. If she wasn't careful, she might become fodder for gossips to feast on for weeks!

The neighborhood watched with approval as Herbert's eyes kept searching for Lizzy as she moved carefully from field to

field. She kept her skirt tucked up above her ankles so she could reap with ease. The smell of prairie honey clung to her. Her plaits hung down her back. His heart rolled in his chest as if on tiny bearings.

Unspoken hope was in the air. She moved sedately within his thoughtful glance. She knew she could depend on Herb to do exactly what was right, to think precisely what was proper.

And she was right; he looked at her and knew: "As soon as she has given birth, she will be slender as a girl."

She tucked her blouse around her waist. She gathered strings of twine and started tying sheaves, thirty bundles to a stook. Jan proudly led the horses. The girls brought up the rear.

"Why are you watching me like that?" she whispered, agonized.

Her spine was fire; her lids felt dry and hot. She took off her scarf and wiped her sweaty brow. The wind played with small wisps of hair, and Herbert saw, and Herbert flushed.

"I'm sorry. Truly sorry."

"Why don't you stay for supper? I'll treat you to some boiled potatoes."

Next time he came to visit, he came an hour early—his beard combed out, clad in his Sunday best.

"Just passing by," he told her awkwardly.

She was busily weeding her pumpkins. "You're welcome anytime," she said. Without looking at him, she gave him her hand. He held it in his own as though her hand was made of porcelain.

He squeezed her fingers carefully. "Your pole beans, in flower already?"

"I guess they are," said Lizzy.

She did not even know, at first, that what she felt was love. The love she had once shared with Nicky had been like glowing metal pouring from a smelter. This, here and now, was different. Calm. It didn't blur her vision.

Jan was as good as his word. His very first harvest bought

Lizzy a cow. She was a splendid beast. Her name was Caroline.

Caroline arrived one foggy morning on a long, frayed rope. She settled placidly into the meadow by the river, where Doctorjay's brown mare grazed with her filly, but only after Jan pulled her for applause the length and breadth of Mennotown.

Lizzy put in Caroline her pride. When she beheld the foaming pails, sheer poetry leaped to her mind.

"Now you'll be the hub of everything again," said Noralee, while biting down her envy. It was hard to compete against Lizzy. Her milk buckets gave her prestige.

So what if Lizzy beat the cream into soft butterballs? was Noralee's next thought. She owned six dozen hens, one fatter than the other. She would just concentrate on eggs.

Everything came easier after Caroline. Caroline was special from the start, chewing cud sedately, calving every spring as though she watched the calendar, worth years of milk and butter.

As a result, Lizzy's hospitality exceeded even Apanlee's. She and her wooden bucket became synonymous with popularity. The neighbors would gather each Sunday—all loved to eat and drink. Their waistlines grew bigger and bigger.

Lizzy loved Caroline dearly, and taught her girls to cherish her as well. They always took a crust along before they settled down, with many pealing giggles, to squeeze the surplus milk from Caroline. To milk a cow with nimble fingers was the prerequisite to cross-embroidery. Once cross-embroidery was mastered, next followed shadow-stitch.

"You better grab Herb while you can," said Noralee to Lizzy. Now that she herself was spherical with her own pregnancy, out of the matrimonial race herself—albeit only temporarily!—from the sidelines she looked out for Lizzy.

The grapevine was her specialty. She snooped. She tattled. She busybodied everyone. It was almost a calling; she knew how to fine-tune a rumor.

And nothing so elated Noralee as following up rumors of romance. She knew how to read between lines. She knew when to

prick up her ears.

"It's rumored," tattled Noralee, "that Greta plans a thatching breakfast. Draw your conclusions, Lizzy."

Lizzy laughed shrilly at this, for no discernible reason. "Oh, really?"

"Yes. Really. As I said, now is the time to draw your own conclusions."

"When?"

Noralee bristled with zeal and impatience. "I don't know when. What does it matter, Lizzy?"

If there was a romantic claim, why not secure it quickly? With undiminished fervor she, for one, believed in following a lead.

"Why take unnecessary risks?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Your roof might need re-thatching," mused Noralee. "Let's see now. Who could help? Could Herbert help? If I were you, I'd ask."

"Not yet," said Lizzy modestly. Noralee kept on wringing her hands.

When the first pig was fattened to the point of bursting, Jan told his mother slyly: "Look at that cat washing its face—"

Lizzy colored gently. "Steps creak when stepped upon—"

"Before the week is out, there will be a surprise—"

She busied herself with a broom. She swept the floors three times a day. She dusted all the sills. She scrubbed the threshold thrice, although rain fell outside. She felt so restive lately she could not sit or stand.

When she saw Herbert coming, she rushed to fetch a cup. "Here, Herbert. Drink. A cup of coffee first. To fortify yourself."

He started stepping up his praise: "Fine coffee, Lizzy. Milky. Hot. Magnificent."

She looked at him and thought: "The length and width of Kansas, there is no kinder man."

He shifted awkwardly. She blushed a pretty pink.

"Ground wheat," she whispered, out of breath. "I roasted it just so."

That gave him confidence. "I better start." With measured movements, he took the lantern from the hook. "Where is the knife?"

Her face went white with tension. This was the part she dreaded most. She said, a quiver in her voice: "Right there. Right on that shelf. Jan took it to the rails and sharpened it for you."

"Well, then," said he. "It must be done."

"What must be done," said Lizzy, bravely, "must be done."

The pig was ripe. The pig must go. She knew the procedure: a heavy blow to dull the pain, the piercing blade into the throat, the bleeding off into the sand, the gurgling of the dying creature. She had no choice. Jan was too young. Here was a man to do the task. Why not?

With whitened knuckles, she listened to the desperate squealing. There! It was over! Praise the Lord!

She stepped forward eagerly. She took one leg, and Herbert took one leg. "*Hau ruck!*"

Together, she and Herbert dragged the carcass from the bloody puddle closer to the scalding water for the scraping of the hair. She helped him lift it up: "*Hau ruck! Hau ruck!*"

Her cheeks caught fire as her hand brushed against Herbert's fingers.

"A splendid beast," said he.

She bit her lip. She helped him fasten hind ends to the rafters. No longer something that had lived; it was a white and naked chunk of pork.

She stood there, watching with possessive pride, as Herbert disemboweled the unlucky pig with a clean sweep of blade. Warm and slippery and steaming, the entrails tumbled out. She stepped up with a bucket and caught them with quick expertise, while Herbert started carving down the spine with effortless, masterly strokes.

By noon, the carcass was cut up, the fat trimmed away to the

bone. Curled sausages rested in buckets. Noralee let the casings slip expertly through her fingers, trading knowing glances with her neighbor, Greta Unruh. Greta was related to the Quirings and the Edigers who lived just to the north of Hillsboro.

"We'll have a wedding soon," predicted Noralee with glee. "Poor Greta! Not a chance." As she pierced every sausage with a sharp, long darning needle, she kept watching Lizzy from the corner of her eye.

"You said it. Greta looks defeated."

"Look. Now she sprinkles salt. And he is sprinkling pepper."

"So what?" poor Greta said. She came of hardy stock. She knew the value of self-discipline, and kept her hurt in check. She did her best to cook these spare ribs to a crisp, while straining hard to catch the salient gossip.

"Watch Herbert help her. See?" said Noralee, by then beside herself, devoid of any mercy.

"I don't need help," lied Greta, the color of a winter beet. "What's it to me? Spare me your sympathy."

She owned raw, hearty knuckles. She dove her arms into the ground-up meat—dove into it, up to her elbows.

"Here, let me help you," Herb said to Lizzy, his fingers in a pot of axle grease. He rubbed the healing ointment deep into her skin, while stroking finger after finger. They stood alone, behind a tree. He spoke the most romantic sentence of his life.

"Here I am, dearest Lizzy. Swaying between hopes and fears."

She read the words that never crossed his lips. She said with lowered lashes: "I have four children, Herbert. I owe two hundred dollars to the Santa Fe."

"A company of patience and of pity."

"And that's not all. Additionally, I owe—" Cold perspiration collected in her arm pits as she remembered all her pressing obligations. A quarter still to Doctorjay, for a sprain that he treated in May. Two dollars to the grocer—three months now overdue. A dollar-fifty in part payment for the lumber bought to finish the

new chicken coop. Four dollars for the barrister in Wichita who told her she had better notarize the paper giving her the title to her homestead, lest the dishonest man came back.

"I have an extra mare," said Herbert, crimson, rubbing hard. "I'll offer it in payment. A chance. That's all I need. A chance."

He did not say but knew: "I know your heart as if it were my own. You love me not, you think? What's love?"

She thought: "What's love? A mushroom might grow overnight. A tree takes many summers."

He asked her while the neighbors processed the pig's heart and liver: "Do you consent to be my wife? I would be deeply honored."

That was the key. Those were the words. She took a deep and trembling breath and said without a quiver: "Yes. I do."

At lunch, beneath the makeshift tent, he sat to Lizzy's left. She took his cup in broiling daylight, and filled it to the brim.

She felt at peace. That was as good as love. She did not ask herself if she could make him happy. She knew that she would smother him with kindness and devotion, and he would make himself happy indeed.

When Doctorjay arrived for supper, dangling a lantern, bringing with him half a dozen unexpected but highly welcome visitors to help him celebrate the slaughter of a pig—why, it was crystal clear to all that love had taken hold. By the time the hams hung proudly in the rafters, a wedding date was firmly set.

"We knew it all along," triumphed Noralee.

And she was right. They knew. They were entwining with the soil; they had a homestead now. Their children and their children's children would once again live flush with God's good earth, if only they followed the rules. By the sheen of the sunsets they knew, and by the golden summer rays that played in dappled leaves before the sun slid back into the sod they had resolved to call their own. They knew as all good people know that life's deep joys are tiny to the eye but mighty to the heart. Why, by the sight of swinging sausages they knew!

# Chapter 14

When Noralee arrived on her bare plot of land with two old, tired horses, a cart of broken household goods and half a dozen weeping children, not one of them her own, all fever-shot and raw of voice, she was not yet thirty years old.

"I still need an axe, a hammer, a hatchet," she bawled.

"I have a wagon, a plow, a harrow, a hayrake," he offered.

He came to her aid in the dark of the night with a flickering kerosene lamp.

"A poisonous germ," he said, and scratched himself with all five fingers. He brushed the children's throats with turpentine, a tearful and retching endeavor. He smoked out her hut to forestall contagion. She rubbed her cheek against his sleeve. He asked to stay and stoke the fire. They talked of this and that.

He would want children of his own. She had some mileage left. How many years? She double-checked by counting on his fingers. Ten, surely. Twelve? If all went well, fifteen?

"But marriage first," she said to him. "That's it." By then, it was a game.

Before that year flew by and sank into eternity, she lost two young ones to diphtheria. A third succumbed to whooping cough before the frosts arrived to freeze the toxic germ.

This freed her to view Doctorjay from a brand new perspective. Though still of a mistaken Faith, he was respected in the neighborhood. She knew she could rely far more on Doctorjay than ever she had leaned on Jacob, who was now with the Lord Almighty, safely, in a gold-embroidered robe.

"Three little graves," she sighed, "amid the space and vastness of the land, with the cold winds blowing over them and life still going on?"

His thoughts proceeded independently.

Surveillance was her specialty. Doctorjay wasn't exactly the Sheik of Araby—his eyebrows met smack in the middle. His teeth had a gap to the left. But, not to be forgotten, his chest was firm and broad. His need was palpable. Her family was cut in half; she felt saddened as well as relieved.

"As slow and shuffling as his father!" screamed Noralee as loudly as she could; tomorrow she would practice her restraint. She made the most of the occasion, knowing well that Doctorjay stood sentry, outside, in the wind.

Lizzy shushed her birthing sibling soothingly—she was here for as long as was needed, to speak her share of prayers and help mop up the blood.

"Just take it easy! Take it easy!" pleaded Lizzy, drawing on her ingenuity. "Here. Sit between two tripod chairs."

Dewey Epp was slow to come into the world; he kept his mother up for nights on end with his appalling indecision before he finally appeared, his meager buttocks first.

"Well, there you have it. A born preacher!" observed the hardy healer when finally allowed inside. "Already he's wrinkling his nose." He checked the newborn's fingers. He checked the newborn's toes.

"I predict he'll make a Christian out of you," hissed a triumphant Noralee, recovering her breath.

"I doubt that. Given that he looks like Rumpelstilzkin,"

Doctorjay laughed with good humor, then bent to her and tickled her a bit. "Just get a good night's rest." Walking home that night as though his path were mined, he waved his flask, elated, at the clouds.

By then, the sparrows chirped it from the roof: as soon as Doctorjay was mentioned, the deacon widow's heart leaped—just like a brazen lark.

She kept inviting him to chicken fries as often as she could. She liked him well enough and said so openly. It was late October; a chill was in the air; the fire in the hearth was blazing.

"Now, everybody! Elbows off the table!" she hollered.

She let him know she would not let her children grow like savages. If thereby Doctorjay learned some decorum accidentally—why, that was fine with her. They even sang duets together—sad, melancholy songs such as the Cossacks sang in Russia.

"Oh, it is cold! It's blowing cold!" they sang and snuggled by the fire. He struck the tuning fork and held it to his ear, expertly sounding out the pitch. She stood in awe of his resonant voice.

Life was, for Noralee, sheer poetry.

She watched him struggle through the snowdrifts to get to her with remedies when little Dewey suffered from a stubborn bout of diarrhea. He kept on dunking Dewey in the tub to clean him up as if the baby were an apple. He stayed all afternoon and far into the night. He had a lusty streak. He begged, cajoled and pleaded, but Noralee said *nyet.*

This time around, she held the hand. She held onto her currency. More yet, she made it last. She was no mealy-mouth. What else might she have done, a woman, still young and reasonably pretty, all alone? She had it from reliable authority that Doctorjay was still an untried bachelor.

Each Saturday night, Doctorjay hitched up his mare and came clop-clopping up to her door. He could have just as easily walked, but he strove to impress Noralee.

She kept the coffee pot warm. She smothered him with hospitality. She liked him; therefore, she fed him.

He stacked corn husks for her, wall to wall and floor to ceiling. He helped her rule her brood with slaps and hollering. He carried in buckets of snow to melt on the sputtering stove while she prepared the tub.

"I'm not buying the pig in the burlap," he told her.

She placed her cheeks into her pudgy fingers. "Here as there," she let him know, "the safe road to success is paved with proper modesty."

He laughed, not in the least deceived.

So let him laugh; she knew she had the upper hand. She was resolved that he would lead her to the altar just like an ass hitched to her bridle. Let him not think that was unnatural.

A baby was a baby, but not all babies were alike; the newborn had pinched lips and gently flaring nostrils. It was jaundiced, tormented by gas. It had his father's narrow chest, regrettably, but it was far from docile. It spit and choked and burped.

The next time Doctorjay came visiting, together they took stock: she owned a cow; he had an eager bull. She owned a flail; he had a brand new harrow. He owned an extra team of horses and a stack of building lumber; she matched that with an idle cousin she could borrow for a fortnight from up north to help set up a shack. They say there is a lid to every pot. They matched up perfectly.

She went to work expertly.

His Sunday trouser legs had too much slack; she was a whiz at thread and needle. So eager for her flesh was he, she could afford to tease. She scorned all undergarments; that was strategy and practical besides.

"It's not as though you have the manners of a clerk," she told him more than once. "What is that bulging from your pocket? Is that your flask? Again?"

He looked at her approvingly—a female with a healthy appetite and no imaginary ailings. He piled a few additional logs. "I put it to you, Noralee: it'll give you a new lease on life."

"I go so far, no farther," she told him. She could afford to wait. She wasn't caught, this time around, as she had been with Jacob, between the Devil and the deep.

She was robust; he, too. She saw no need to hide from Doctorjay the chipped, enameled chamberpot that she had brought along from Russia. She had to pee; he didn't leave; why fuss? The choice boiled down to chamberpot or outhouse; the snow outside piled four feet high; and Noralee was Noralee.

"Just turn around," she told him, giggling. "And close your eyes and ears." Why not be practical? She pulled the curtains, told Doctorjay to hum a tune, and settled down majestically to obey nature's call.

So it went through the winter. She could not wait to find out everything she missed about the mysteries of sex as Jacob's wife, but still she savored the pursuit.

Doctorjay was a fanciful suitor. When he surveyed her neck or earlobe, goose pimples rose in unexpected places. She reveled in the luxury of power. She read him like an open book, and what she read, right from the start, was better left unsaid.

His need was as old as the Gospel; she was determined to proceed to matrimonial rectitude the proper way this time.

Yet the outcome was never in doubt. She hugged the infant Dewey to her bosom and told her suitor, coyly: "The treasure beyond price is now my highest currency."

"The baby? Still in pain?" the bonesetter inquired.

"Yes. Still in pain. In great pain. A rash formed on his bottom."

"Well. Let me see. And you? What you need, Noralee, is someone to replace your husband."

He was the first who made a solid shift to English.

She tried to be his equal there as well, defecting from the German tongue. "Yes. Life goes on. The sun comes up. A new day starts. Poor Jacob, as I always say. Flat in the earth. Forgotten."

They looked at each other, suppressing smiles. He found in her eyes what he sought. She knew he made good money.

"Come here," he told her boldly. "By now, you should be hitched."

"You should be, too. To an obedient wife."

"Whatever for?" he teased.

"It's a democracy," said Noralee. "That's why."

"Look. Lots of snow outside," said Noralee, inventively, searching for dampness amid Dewey's diapers.

He offered an opinion: snow could be either shoveled or endured.

Yes, said the widow. That was true.

"A dog is barking. Listen," he added, hopefully.

"It makes you scared to think that we are all alone."

He shifted in his seat, his blue eyes small and merry. "It's lonely, isn't it?"

"You can say that again."

"Come here," he said. "Sit by my side. Sit down by my side, Noralee. Put your two feet on this fine brick I warmed especially for you—or, better yet, right in my lap. There's something we have to discuss."

Sharp joy came in a rush. His appetite was palpable. He would not run away.

"I know all your wishes," she teased. She watched him with attentive eyes. She wasn't blind; he had his faults. But so did she; was anybody perfect? What might he say if he found out that she had burned her Sunday meal? Would he back out if he knew that?

Could be.

With certain things, you stood on quaking ground. She had her fears. She knew that there were ups and downs to almost any marriage.

"Such as?"

She studied him with speculative eyes. This man was popular with everyone: praiseworthy, handsome and robust; nature had been generous. He even held the door for her and let her walk through first. Some people claimed he drank too much, especially on holidays, but so what if he tippled a bit?

And finally, there was the matter of her age. She could practically mother the lad. She came of hardy stock, however; her relatives lived far into the nineties.

"No matter," she decided. Together, they would have their good times and their bad, and she would put a premium on obedience.

Her admiration grew.

The things that Doctorjay could do with herbs; the talent that he had with blisters! In whispers, she filled Lizzy in. Both lost themselves in reveries.

"All but—" said Noralee, while smiling wickedly.

"Oh, that," said Lizzy, squirming, "is understood, of course. He knows that. Doesn't he?"

Well, touch and go, said Noralee, while filling Lizzy in.

Once, when by accident she slipped and dislocated her left ankle, who else but Doctorjay came to her help at once? He was the one who grabbed it, boldly! twisted it, and plunk! the bone slid back into its socket.

"He asked me then and there to just up and surrender my youth."

Lizzy's eyes opened wide: "No! Then and there? Why, Noralee! The outrage!"

"Believe it or not. 'No bill,' said the brute! 'Just a smack on my whiskers. Right on my schmoozer here!'"

"All men are wolves," shuddered Lizzy. The talk confirmed her worst suspicions. But on the other hand, what choice?

"So, yes or no? Did you?"

"Right on his schmoozer."

"No!"

"So?"

"You didn't! Oh, my God!"

"Was there a choice?"

"You had no choice," admitted Lizzy, a pragmatic female. "What might have been the end result, had you gone on to find yourself a haughty doctor practicing in Wichita?"

" A stiff cast and an inflated—"

"—and an inflated bill, that's what!"

"That's right! That's what!" Noralee felt giddy with triumph. "There's only one small problem."

"What's that?"

"See, everything, to him, is like a great, big—"

Lizzy tried hard to catch up with her knitting. "Yes. Hush!" She blushed the color of a strawberry. "It comes with being Lutheran," she whispered.

"—just like a great big carnival."

Silence came after that shocking remark. Next followed some eloquent sighs. There was a price to pay, both knew. When passion struck, what might a Lutheran do?

The widow whispered into Lizzy's ear that she, for one, had every premonition.

"Feed him a gherkin on the sly," advised her sister, mortified. Might Doctorjay insist on making love with the bright sun still hanging in the sky?

One windy afternoon, Doctorjay caught a convenient ride to Wichita and came back with a funny contraption. He called it a velocipede.

"What in the world?" shrieked Noralee. Her eyes just popped; the cat absconded with her tongue. "Why, Doctorjay! What's that? You? Living in the lap of luxury? What's gotten into you!"

"Getting worldly! Getting worldly! " shouted he, pedaling around her thrice before proudly pedaling away, balancing precariously, his gunnysack trousers ballooning.

"Wait! Wait!"

"Make up your mind. Remember the pig in the burlap?"

She was so much in love, by then, the power of her limbs deserted her whenever he was near. Her throat felt dry. Her face caught fire. She looked at Doctorjay and pragmatism settled firmly in her bosom. She squared her chin, resolved to brave the Brethren.

"Oh, well," said Noralee. "So what if he's a Lutheran? The world comes to my door."

# Chapter 15

A full-time preacher was as rare as velvet in the early pioneering days, and eager couples waiting to be wed bunched up on part-time preachers' calendars like pussywillows on a stem.

"Next weekend," Noralee announced. "It's all planned properly. And Doctorjay is in for a surprise."

Lizzy peered at her determined sister with suspicion. "But don't you think you better tell him, too?"

The widow blew her nose with sentiment. "He'll find out soon enough."

By then, the winter days were past; the world was carpeted with green; her grief for Jacob's little ones now resting on a hill had all but dissipated. "He won't say no, unless there's water on his brain."

"You aren't rushing things, are you?" asked Herbert laughingly.

She closed her eyes, luxuriating. "Naw! He means business. That I know."

She had rehearsed already. The rest was mere formality.

The splendid double wedding set the trend for many years to come.

The neighborhood women had whitewashed the sod walls with ashes and garnished the gables with wreaths. The backdrop, poor though they were, looked all but palatial, and Herbert plain outdid himself to make sure Lizzy had the spotlight she deserved.

Dozens of close kin attended the festivity, as did the lesser relatives, among them Herbert's father's sister's bedfast wife, one foot already planted in the grave, who almost stole the show with stories of her gout.

The Unruhs and the Ewerts and the Harders arrived from up north with their numerous children, all growing like the grass—silent, tall and lush—every one a jovial farmer, reaping five bushels to the acre, though plowing with slow oxen was a chore.

Doctorjay had canvassed the neighborhood, and friends chipped in—with forks, knives, spoons and coffee cups to help feed the visiting throng. The aunts and uncles helped themselves to extra bellyfuls while Noralee ran back and forth from guest to guest:

"Eat. Eat. Now eat before the food gets cold. Don't shame me by eating so little!"

Herbert was so much in love that he threw caution to the wind: he called upon a Methodist who had a clever eye, and arrived with duffle bag and tripod to get the guests to pose in front of Lizzy's home. That picture still exists.

Lizzy stands beside her husband in a festive, borrowed dress. To her right stands Jan with his three spotless sisters; to her left are four of Herbert's sons and daughters, and all of them are smiling. Noralee, imbued with romantic elan of her own, is standing on a milk pail, bringing up the rear, and next to her stands Doctorjay who grins from ear to ear.

And look at Little Melly in that old, faded photograph—and think what might have been!

Little Melly's radiant smile consumes the crumbling picture.

It is a shy yet lustrous smile—a smile that should have been fanned into passion, that could have extinguished all shadows. That long-forgotten day, still captured in an old daguerrotype, proves that she was a comely girl, her hair a lovely shade.

Misfortune came to Little Melly's love. In years to come, she would oft tell a sad and meager story, fumbling ever with that twisted web of circumstances that stole her happiness and set her on the road, against her will, to spinsterhood.

What lay in store for her, nobody present at that double wedding could have guessed. She was too young to read the sheen in Herbert's eyes, the eagerness in Doctorjay's wide grin—but she was practicing already, one can see that, with marriage in mind. Her cheerful smile told Jan: "I'll marry you when I grow up." The picture captured it, that sparkle in her eyes that told the boy as clearly as a bell: "Wherever you will lead, I'll follow you in confidence."

But Jan? In that old, yellowed photograph the artist Methodist produced, Jan looks as though he is merely suppressing a sneeze.

Noralee sniffled noisily throughout the lengthy sermon the borrowed preacher stuttered forth. She cried as hard at weddings as at funerals; she sang as prettily at each, proud of her lovely voice.

She kept a crafty eye on Doctorjay who nearly burst with sentiment. He had uncorked a bottle, from which he quaffed at intervals. So overcome was Doctorjay with rapture and elation that he kept shouting, patriotically: "Hurray! Hurray! Hurray!," and tried to climb upon a table to get a better view.

"Hats off! Hats off!" he shouted.

He thought he'd go mad with delight. So overcome was he by his own luck and status that he came close, in fact, asking the Brethren for admission then and there. In fact, he stalked them stealthily throughout an afternoon, and far into the night, yet in the end, he still remained a Lutheran, to everyone's regret—he liked his flask too much.

Had Doctorjay converted to the Brethren, it would have pleased the neighborhood. In fact, in later years it would have mightily pleased Dewey—attending the festivity, in diapers still and, hence, too small to preach against the whiskey flag that emanated pungently from Doctorjay's inebriated nostrils. In years to come, when Dewey settled down to be the mouthpiece of the Lord, he had much catching up to do. But on that afternoon, he was an infant still who lay in a potato crate and chewed upon his fingers.

The Lord smiled on America, and Doctorjay smiled back. He loved America! You had your options here. On meeting either friend or foe, they always paid you notice. No matter where you started out, you could end up in any place you chose.

Day after day slipped away. The calendar kept count. The bake sales never stopped.

Here another brand new flour mill. There a grist mill or brick works. Before you knew it, it was time again for everyone to color Easter eggs with onion skin. Then came summer; sooner, fall. Out came the double underwear. The winter relatives came visiting.

You threw your arms around each aunt and uncle—they did the same to you!—and there were hugs and kisses all around.

Winter days—time for relaxing. Winter nights—long, silent and crisp. The Kansas winter winds blew hard. You gossiped and you shared. The talk was of the common things that gladdened everyone. To the right slept the children, to the left slept the cows. Extra visitors climbed up to the loft, and all across the prairie drifted advent carolings as the beloved Christ Child filtered from the trees and right into the hearts of genuine believers.

New Year. It came and went. The relatives departed. You shouted after them: "Be sure to come visit next year! Come earlier, and stay longer!"

The wind whirled dry snow after them.

All that is gone but not forgotten: those things spelled happi-

ness. Now only memories remain of difficult but richly textured times, those early pioneering years: borscht bubbling aromatically in the terrine, crisp gherkins floating in the brine, cow chips piled clear up to the rafters to keep the sod home toasty, no matter how the prairie wind might howl.

The formula was simple. You worked as hard as the seasons demanded and the markets dictated you should.

Life no bed of roses yet, but nobody complained, and certainly not Noralee. Her husband saw to that. If Noralee compared the life that Doctorjay carved out for her to what she left in Russia, she did so at her peril.

Their diligence paid off. Just yesterday, the homes but lone and wind-blown huts; now, homesteads everywhere you looked—dotting the sea of the prairie. Life was no picnic, then or now, but since you had your Lord, your neighborhood, your quilting bee and your expanding family, you had too much to do to waste your time on dreams.

The swallows were returning once again, obeying an internal clock.

The prairie turned to soft greens and blues and sometimes, briefly, emerald and sapphire.

The sunsets changed from gold to red to purple.

Just as the seed kept multiplying, so did the German families. There were many weddings, which tied, with prayer's twine, the past to present and future.

You managed as you could, and if you dreamed at all, you dreamed of coming harvests. The grain lay shimmering beneath the sun. It still took nearly twenty bushels to buy one pair of boots, and that didn't count extra laces.

Some oldsters died. Young fry were born. The chains of love and kin were there to stay, long after each was bedded in his grave.

Doctorjay increased in importance and status and made hefty money besides.

When an infection swelled Jan's face one windy afternoon,

Doctorjay pulled him aside to counsel him at length. "Your wisdom tooth," said he, already fumbling for his pliers. "You do not need it, Jan. A wisdom tooth is useless."

Jan wiped his brow and smiled a sickly smile.

"It must come out."

"Out?"

"Out."

"When?"

"Now."

Doctorjay did not waste time or energy on mercy. "Now, Little Melly, honey, fetch me my bottle from the hay where I have hidden it. Jan, this will hurt. Here, have a swig. Do just exactly as I say. Here is a chair. Hold on."

Jan took a swallow, shook himself and turned a sickly green: "It's awful, Doctorjay."

"A man gets used to it." In full control, he gave his orders like a general, spread-legged in Lizzy's kitchen. If he said "Out!" then out! He had been born a field hand in the old country; here in America, he had advanced to the admired status of a respected medicus.

"Now, Little Melly! Bolt the door behind you and keep it bolted until this lad can walk again. Now, honey! Don't you cry. Don't worry. He'll survive it."

"Don't worry," Jan said, too, his eyes on Little Melly.

Her eyes filled up with ready tears. He touched her heaving shoulders.

"Don't worry. I'll survive it."

She stored that touch. Endearments were scarce. She was a youngster still. She looked at him, and love shone from her eyes. He looked at her and knew: she will grow up into a strong and lovely girl with water-braided hair.

"I will stay here," she squawked. "And shriek."

"All right," said Doctorjay. "So stay. So shriek. But with your back against the door so he can't bolt the kitchen. Just put your fists up to your ears. Now shriek!"

Jan held on tight, his head careening, while Doctorjay reached

for his rusty instrument and started pulling hard. Jan slumped while Little Melly shrieked and Lizzy fell into a swoon. Doctorjay stepped over her and told Jan, who sat up and shivered: "Pay up. You owe me a dime and a nickel."

Jan paid with trembling hands—a bargain, all in all.

As Jan became a man and forged his personality, he bought up land that was cheap. His older sisters, one by one, were marrying compliant husbands and settling where the soil was black.

Their families exploded. They needed more room at the table. Jan planted additional crops.

Though he was still a bachelor, he was soon guiding the community in prudent leadership. When Jan turned up his sleeves, that was the sign for everyone: chip in with your time and your money!

He was his community's pride. He served on a dozen committees. With relatives, he never lost his patience. He was a good provider. Lizzy didn't have to watch her pennies, although she always shopped with care. In Wichita, the Hebrew merchants knew her as a fussy customer.

Lizzy's eyes just shone with love and ownership as she watched Jan plow up the Kansas earth. He laid the sod, expertly, without a break in rhythm, into a straight, long furrow to his left. The heritage of Apanlee was clearly in his bones. Had she been a poetic soul, she would have found the words. The hunchback child she left behind might have done that—not Lizzy.

She didn't need a poem, verily! to plumb the mystery of virgin soil that yielded to Jan's plow.

On snowy winter nights, when work slowed down, Lizzy thought of Apanlee at times, as if that period in her youth had been a hazy dream. Now, winter fostered leisure, and leisure fostered oneness and stability the likes of which she, Lizzy, never could have dreamed while living in the lap of luxury at Apanlee. There rich were rich and poor were poor. Here, everyone was equal. She did not grieve her loss. She came of a genuine pio-

neer stock. This was America.

Thick snowflakes kept on floating from the clouds. She watched how the prairie moon climbed over the snow-laden roof. She listened to the howling of the winter, hoping for some news stray visitors might bring. Back home, she knew, the winds blew over Apanlee as well, but here, on the prairie, in the oven Herb built, Lizzy's cow chips crackled like rockets.

"A bald land," she had wailed when first she came to tame the prairie plains, and now she knew she loved it. She loved it more than she had ever loved the haughty land of Apanlee.

The only thing that counted in America was that you did your best: You did the best you could. That's what she, Lizzy, did. The glow of her windows? Unmatched.

The starry sky of Apanlee was yesterday; she barely gave those times a thought. Life on the prairie sod was still a harsh and bitter struggle—for man as well as beast—but happiness and certainty were there, deep down where Faith was stored. Outside was locked in winter's depth; inside was certainty. Wet snow lay on her windowsill, clung to her roof, buried fences, blew through the naked branches of the trees. Jan saw to it that she had heaps of cow chips, stacked up in triple rows behind the house. Her daughters, one by one, made sure they did the dishes, alternating peacefully to keep the schedule straight.

And she had Herbert; he had her. She gave him her devotion; he paid her back in kind. What might she want of life she didn't have already? The walls renewed, the gables straight, a horse-drawn pump within her reach—all that spelled prosperity, comfort and bounty. Her armchair sat close to the stove, where Herbert had moved it to give her additional warmth.

While Lizzy waited to give birth to Herb's first prairie child, he carried wood inside for her; he wouldn't even let her stoke the stove; he threw the ashes out.

When Lizzy heard a rumor of the female vote, she merely shook her head: if such an aberration ever came to pass—why, *jemine*! by then she would be dead.

For she sat snug. She was content. Her girls slept in an orderly row. They, too, were safe, and they were warm, and they were dimpled everywhere, for Herbert saw to it she needn't skimp on sour cream. He was like that—so generous she could not think of anything he might withhold from her.

She knew she was cherished, respected and loved.

So would her daughters be, as long as they followed the script of the creed and the Scriptures the Lord had provided.

Herbert had hoped for a boy, but Lizzy bore only plump daughters. The neighborhood was gratified, for Mennotown was not a place where females had a waistline as though they competed with wasps.

Herbert said nothing the first time it happened, though clearly he longed for that son.

She cast her lashes on her cheeks and hoped he wouldn't mention gender until the female baby had a chance to nestle in his heart.

Herb walked on tiptoes for a week as though she had performed a wondrous miracle while merely giving birth. He didn't track mud in the house. He read every wish from her eyes. He stifled his voice. He doubled his civility. And though the newborn slept as soundly as any new-born calf embedded in fresh straw and soon developed a prodigious appetite, he just kept on tiptoeing gently.

"It's only a girl," she said softly.

"It matters not," said he. His voice was hushed with reverence. "Look at her stubby hands. Look at those arching eyebrows."

"Next time, I'll swallow watermelon rind, and on an empty stomach," she offered wretchedly.

"My dear. I said it matters not. Look at those darling toes. They move. They move already. See?"

And Jan as well, who was a doting brother as well as tribal chief. He took another little sibling to his heart and kept it there for life.

"Let's call her Daisy," Jan suggested when he first saw the color of his baby sister's hair. But Lizzy was an anxious mother—more so as she matured. Though nicknamed all her life herself and to no obvious peril, the dire warnings of the Elder Willy, now long since dead and gathered to his fathers, were still a warning in her ears. In this world and the next, you followed the general trend.

"A foreign forename? Is that wise? We ought to keep unto ourselves."

"We live now in America," said Jan, for his part getting modern. "We strive not to offend."

She said reluctantly: "It is a pretty name. It makes you think of hay."

Her husband smiled at her, thus kindling a small blush. How well he read her thoughts!

"All right. Why not?" said Lizzy, overcome, but happy, deep inside. The Elders frowned on English names and mentioned certain risks.

The etiquette of Mennotown was marble. If you stuck to the habits that centuries had wrought, then God was on your side. If you trespassed, you stood alone; the deacons looked askance at you; their faces shining like pale moons, while sitting in a row along the wall with thunder on their brows.

But oh! this was America! with bounty beyond words. The overpowering temptation to add a little extra opulence to such a tiny life that smelled so good and clean! Lizzy anxiously cuddled the baby: "You're sure it won't do harm?"

"I checked it with the county clerk. It is a lawful name."

Jan loved his little sister dearly and spoiled her wantonly. She made him laugh; she looked so tranquil and serene as she lay snoozing in her cradle; she would grow up to pots and pans without resistance; she would bake her zwieback to general approval.

"She's perfect," boasted Jan. "I've bought her a parcel already." He bought up land at every opportunity, alert for the right price.

"She'll thank you," promised Lizzy, "as soon as she can speak."

These were the boundaries of joy. She was the luckiest woman in the world to have so fine a son who was so openly protective of his sisters—a son still years away from wearing his mustache upturned at both ends, a sign that he expected female deference and would insist on it.

Like everybody else.

Jan had an instinct for selecting strong, rich soil. His prudent purchases of land increased the homestead limits. He stood atop his wagon, dropping the sheaves into piles, carting them off to the wide-open barn. The Mennotown people looked on.

Herbert's old hat was off to Jan. He trusted and respected his stepson, who knew how to drive vital bargains.

Though Jan deferred to Herb in every other matter, he was the one who saw to it that every penny saved and every dollar set aside, by purchasing, selling and trading, was spent on improving the land.

"Use your own judgment, son," said Herbert many times, a mild man with no need to guard his rightful station at the head of Sunday supper. Trained to obedience from the cradle, Jan had a proper sense of duty. The ways of honoring his elders he always clearly understood.

"That's not for me to say," said Jan when the barn needed widening, the door needed hinges, the cattle buyers needed overwhelming with his mother's hospitality so that they slashed their bargains.

"No. You first. You go first," they kept urging each other when it came time to climb onto the buggy.

You understood the other's point of view. You praised your mother's husband's diligence and gentle manners and frugality, behaving as if polishing a precious stone. In turn, he never humbled you.

"Like father, like son," thought Lizzy, a lump in her throat. A fool might have needed the vote.

While Daisy was still teething, Lizzy waited for her husband's second child, then for his third and, on its heels, his fourth. She named them Hermina, Regina and Lina.

"A lucky clover leaf," said Herbert happily.

She looked at him with misty eyes. What a poetic man!

He was as satisfying as a pot of beans, and just as commonplace, but he was gentle always, as gentle as June rain. When she recalled his gentleness, it gave her emotions a twinge. Her feelings kept kneading her heart, as though they were kneading the loaves on her breadboard to feed her growing family. With every passing day, appreciation grew.

When Herb turned fifty years of age, she was so overcome with gratitude she spread an extra tablecloth and lit an extra lamp.

For years, she didn't stop to ask herself: "Am I in love with him?" When she finally did, she gave herself time before she replied.

Her radiant love of yesterday had washed into the ocean; with him had disappeared her youth—a world of light and breezes. The prairie times had schooled her thoroughly in practicality and being down-to-earth.

She had a decent life at Herbert's rugged side—the kind of life that spread her hips and settled on her thighs and thereby signified prosperity, which was the yardstick, after all, by which the neighbors judged.

Herbert had come into her life as though in answer to her prayers. He gave her everything she wanted, needed and consumed. She gave him his just due; she gave him her esteem. He turned around and gave her kindness and respect. She matched that with her courtesy, and he, in turn, paid Lizzy back the coin of loyalty and warmth.

Some might have claimed he was a bit plebeian. He kept his elbows frayed. But did that matter? No. He tucked her deep into the feather bed and covered every toe.

Before too many years were gone, she and her second hus-

band walked placidly amid the budding trees, across the beauty of young grasses. She counted her blessings, content. Her daughters—silver voices, all. Just perfect for the choir.

And Jan? The dream of any girl.

She, Lizzy, asked no more. She felt as though she were driving around a blue lake, just marveling at its smooth surface. When Herbert came and knelt by her as she sat scrubbing away at a bucket and made a whistle from a leaf to make her laugh, she knew: "I am so lucky. And so blessed."

She knew with a small shiver: "Before he touches me, he stoops to wash his hands."

Small favor in return to give to him, while she could, the children that he craved. To have as many babies as she could before her body fell as silent as the creek did in December: that was like dropping gold coins in a box.

With Herbert she had seven, and all of them survived.

Each morning, Lizzy thanked the Lord that she had Caroline before she had her prairie girls. Lizzy was as proud of Caroline as if she'd been a relative—instead of just a cow.

She smothered Caroline with dandelions to keep her in top shape. And it paid off. The evidence was there. Each spring, for a small fee, Doctorjay checked out the babies of the entire neighborhood, including Lizzy's brood.

"Fit as a fiddle! Fit as a fiddle!" he shouted, fine sparklets flying from his lips like flying from an anvil.

Concerning doctoring, nobody was his equal. He checked each newborn out from head to toe, smoke curling from his nostrils, while Lizzy stood as close as modesty allowed and beamed.

Who wouldn't have? Resilient babies, all!

All had prodigious appetites. Thank God that she had Caroline—and thanks to Caroline, she had the chubbiest babies of the decade.

"I let them drink all the milk that they want," bragged Lizzy. The cream, of course, was ladled first. The cream she took to Wichita—for cash.

Lizzy started making cheese as an experiment, first wrapping it in clean, wet cloth, then taking it to Wichita to offer at the market. The Wichitans sniffed Lizzy's cheese, rolled slices of it deftly between thumb and finger, licked several slivers carefully, and presto: Lizzy had a business.

Noralee could have just kicked herself: why didn't she think first of all the possibilities of cheese?

She was so cross for having missed her opportunity that all her muscles ached. Now Lizzy didn't need to ask her husband for pin money, though Herbert would have gladly forked it over. So much in love with Lizzy was the man that he indulged her every whim. When she bought sugar, tea, salt, herring, sardines, overshoes and toweling, he didn't say a word. Lizzy went to Wichita to shop at Levi's Wholesales where she could knock the price in half on special rebate days.

She bought as much as sixty yards of gingham, and Herbert? Not a peep. She bought a dozen spools of matching thread, just jingling the change in her purse.

As counterstroke to Lizzy's cheese success, and to augment her own eroding status, Noralee, intent on spicing her own chance, volunteered to be in charge of Mennotown's sparse mail.

When Noralee made of herself a bureaucrat, the government officials made several discreet inquiries: Was Noralee a reader? Could she decipther properly?

It was not easy to become a civil servant, for now it took "criteria".

The bonesetter explained it all. It meant, said he, you couldn't just waltz in; you had to prove yourself. That was a novel thought with which to run a government. But Doctorjay backed Noralee with every resource he could marshall; he would assist; he was strategically located; he owned a store already, on the corner of Maple and Main. There he kept shelves supplied with useful merchandise—straight razors, horse blankets, wheel caps for surreys, harness straps, dishes, pots and pans.

A postal branch, he calculated shrewdly, would draw the most reluctant customers.

Mail came infrequently, but when it came, it had to be distributed, and Noralee bestirred herself to become equal to the task. She took firm control of the mail pouch.

This happened the following spring.

Outgoing mail left once a month, in burlap sacks on the back of one of Doctorjay's retired mares. These letters presented no problem: you aimed them at the basket—plunk!—and bureaucrats were paid to sort them out in Wichita.

Incoming letters, on the other hand, came weekly, and they required ingenuity, which was where Noralee excelled. She sifted them for salient clues. She had to know what was inside before she passed them on, and Noralee had guessing powers in abundance. She practically had second sight.

She sorted through the letters carefully to see which ones to open and inspect. Her rationale was simple: She loved an entertaining story. That's where the tea steam came in handy. It opened every seal.

Her husband chided her at times and poked his elbow in her ribs; she shrugged that off: a fine one, he, to speak! He had his own addiction; now she had hers—a vice no less affording strong euphoria than his alluring flask.

She kibitzed shamelessly. Her eyes just snapped with glee. If Lizzy had her victories—well, so did Noralee. She smilingly watched people buy their groceries while fingering their neighbors' letters and guessing at the content—while, all the while, she knew!

There was no shame in her. Opening somebody else's mail was just like perching on a window sill, as though she were a canary. With her old kettle humming and with her heartbeat in her throat, Noralee felt equal now to almost any challenge.

She studied each letter at length. She read between the lines. The fattest ones she put aside behind her jar that held her garlic salt until she found an afternoon to take them over to Lizzy, for

Lizzy needed news; she wanted to know, too.

Those two had a fine time. They had a headstart on the weeping if someone passed away as far away as Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. If they detected a romance, they broke into small, savage shrieks. At somber news, they clucked their tongues: the church was not deceived.

For years, those two would follow breaking stories. The thing that kept them going was suspense. They waited for the other shoe to drop. And when it did—pure bliss!

Soap operas? Pale, by comparison, compared to prairie melodrama.

# Chapter 16

Right after the harvest was in, and the reapers were parked in the sheds, Doctorjay went in search of a Wichita joyfest and found it.

"Where is America?" sang Doctorjay melodically, returning late, while making a beeline for bed.

"Right here. Right here," coaxed Noralee, and steered him by the elbow, not sure if she should laugh or cry.

"Not far from Oregon?" howled Doctorjay while searching for a pillow on which to rest his head.

"Boots off!" hissed Noralee.

He hit the highest note: "In Pennsylvania?" With waves of fiery brandy surging through his veins, the words came by themselves. "I thought it was New Mexico," he hooted lustily, not bothering with pitch and key.

It happened every year, right after the election and just before Thanksgiving. At other patriotic holidays, he practiced his restraint; he settled for the colors of his country in his buttonhole and was content to toast this victory, that celebration, in proper moderation. Two holidays, however, back-to-back, were differ-

ent. Temptation proved too much. This was his season of indulgence when he pulled out all stops.

"Your antics, the laugh of the town," shrieked Noralee and sprinkled him with vinegar to keep the ants away. "What will the neighbors say?"

"The neighbors? Who? What neighbors?"

"One drink led to another?"

"You guessed it," he admitted peevishly.

Doctorjay stood on his porch and watched how firecrackers lit up the warm Wichita sky in celebration of his chosen country's first centennial. If you were a real patriot—the kind for which the bonesetter was known—you loved your country's streamers, songs and banners.

"Hip! Hip! Hurray!" he hollered. He hoisted little Dewey onto his shoulders so he could better see the caterpillar band. Did anybody miss the pomp and pageantry of holidays that came with having tsars?

Most anybody, by that time, who could afford to purchase a velocipede, had purchased one and used it to exhaustion; and Doctorjay did too; as often as he could. He pedaled all the way to Wichita, where he could ambush strangers to share a drink and partake in the ways of the world. America was on the move, and he was part of it. Since he had turned his back on monarchy, he couldn't get enough.

More! More! That was his motto. This lust to make friends out of people of uncertain status came over him periodically, like vast and potent waves. The results were strong, radical views.

As hunger follows a meal, no matter how rich, or a baby follows a romp in the hay, no matter how dimpled the last one, so Doctorjay would hit his bottle, broadside and full force, when his passion for handshakes took over. Give him two patriotic holidays where a band played with nary a pause between marches, so loud that all the windows rattled, and Doctorjay would lash his mare into a brisk gallop to take himself to downtown Wichita in

his beloved surrey to find an audience.

"What does it take?" he pointed out when several Elders came to scold. "Who helped you build your church?"

"You did," admitted they. "Nobody can deny that. But why don't you attend?"

"I do."

"Once every blue moon."

"I tithe. Do I not tithe?"

He was a solid ten-percenter. He did his tithing with a flourish. He made fat crosses on his calendar, lest he forget the tithing week. In fact, he was next to non-Lutheran that way. Tithing made him feel as though he were a king, instead of just an ordinary healer. One-tenth, and not one penny less, was set aside to please his country and his Lord.

"That's America for you," he said to Noralee. She kept his tithing can right on the kitchen window sill, next to her red geraniums, behind the molars and licorice sticks. She shook it now and then and listened to the clunking. She knew he put his coins smack in the middle of the preacher's hat, right next to Jan's new silver dollars, and here they were. Identical. Each time he did, he stared at them, enthralled. Did not a rooster crow with joy?

"Why is it harder, though, to change my husband than to convert a Tartar?"

It was an argument that went around in circles. It was the flask. It was the blasted bottle. Nothing else set Doctorjay apart from his community. He clung to being Lutheran so he could keep his bottle. His moonshine was the bottom line.

The only sorrow was: he had to drink alone. He thirsted for a mirthful buddy who partook. The deacons waylaid anyone whom Doctorjay tried captivating and recruiting. The roving Elders, at such times, were his decided foes.

The Elders pointed out: "Your habit—even worse than smoking."

That, too. Most folks indulged in pipes, since pipes had a calming effect. Jan's barn, where the entire neighborhood would

congregate because the place was wide and warm, was always filled with fumes.

"Say, Jan," coaxed Doctorjay. "A little fire water?" That way, he resembled a donkey. He hankered to round out his pleasures. But Jan just shook him off: "Just leave me out! Could I forget that wisdom tooth? You cured me for all time."

"Just as a favor to a friend?"

"It's not for me," said Jan.

From earliest youth, Jan had his values straight. He spoke with firm conviction. Jan held himself aloof. He was, by then, a model bachelor, held in greater honor than any young man of his day.

By then, progress was everywhere. It could be seen, and heard, and felt. The world was knocking on Mennotown's doors, and with it came temptations. The vanity and fanciness of Eaton's store-bought mittens!

Some people went so far as to predict that soon the horse would be as obsolete as last year's almanac.

Which was, the Elders said, absurd. Was science mad, or what? If you thought that science could antiquate horses, you knew you were building on sand.

There was no doubt, by then: America was turning modern, and Wichita as well. Could Mennotown be far behind? Not with Jan's enterprising spirit, or Lizzy's thrift, or Herbert's eagerness to keep abreast with the times.

Herb went to do a little business with the Jews in Wichita, and bought his wife a Singer. Word spread about the wonder needle. No longer did Herb's Lizzy stitch by hand; she pedaled with her foot; that was extravagant in the extreme, but nonetheless impressive.

Lizzy shared with Noralee the wonders of modernity. Both cut themselves wide, flowing frocks from several printed sugar sacks. Even then, they used Butterick patterns.

They inspected each other—this angle and that!—both of them helpless with giggles. Amazing the bulges a baby could make!

The future grew under their aprons.

After marrying the child-rich widow Noralee, Doctorjay bought several oxen—replete with yoke and chains—a brake plow and a brand new axe to get the edge on Herbert. Both strove to have the highest yield per seed. They were not only neighbors, they were the best of friends. They sang each other's praises but competed in livestock as well as in potatoes, leather, wool and pottery.

They did such things and held such views as did the neighborhood. Doctorjay looked pained when he learned how Herb beat him to an oblong parlor, with fancy woodwork and a clever system of cross-drafts. Now Lizzy's living room had three large windows, while his had only two. Immediately, Doctorjay knocked out out a wall, and Noralee caught up with Lizzy's added status—but not for long, for Lizzy got an indoor pump, next to her cozy kitchen, which called for added effort.

Lizzy was the perfect model of what prairie life was all about—combining the old with the new. Accommodation was her specialty. She improvised and learned from every English-speaking neighbor.

Lizzy now spoke English to her cats and dogs, though not yet to her chickens. She switched from *Riebelplatz* to custard pie. From there it was a tiny step to turkey meat and hot dogs. Next, spaghetti feeds, a novelty.

There was no end to her inventions to create opulence from naught—no end to Lizzy's wifely pride. The corners of her kitchen were fitted out with rough-hewn shelves displaying matching pewter plates in ample order, gifts from her husband's relatives, most of whom farmsteaded north—in the Dakotas, in Nebraska, as far away as Winnipeg.

She and Herb had pooled their household items: five brass and iron kettles, a skillet, two cleavers, a brand new set of measures, three funnels, a double set of spoons, along with knives and forks. Each Friday, Little Melly settled on the porch to scour them until they shone like jewels.

"Like so?" asked Little Melly, who also strove to be exceptional in all ways big and small.

"No, not like so. Like so," taught Lizzy patiently.

The pots and pans were her domain, but Little Melly stood in line and couldn't wait to trade the school bench for the kitchen, and Lizzy taught her how to pinch *vareniki* with thumb and middle finger so that the cottage cheese did not seep out, another hallowed ritual. Next on the tally for a future wife were tricks of beating sour cream until it clotted into butter. Once that was learned to instinct, in line was shadow stitch.

When Little Melly was laid low with chicken pox and Doctorjay said, shaking a stern finger: "Quarantine!", Jan walked around bereaved as though he'd lost his shadow.

The barley was sprouting already. The yield each year was larger than that of the previous year. Time did not stop; progress marched on; the opportunities were there; inventive people started picking surplus nickels off the street.

Before another year was gone, Doctorjay patented a soothing syrup and called it Doctorjay's Ready Relief. It was a potent tonic. It helped just about everyone for anything at all, and only cost a dime. A sample sat on Noralee's top shelf, next to the molars Doctorjay had harvested and kept in a jar for display.

Doctorjay was a resourceful man; he knew his share of healing secrets. He learned by practicing on shut-ins the things he didn't know. He practiced to his heart's content while everyone held still.

Here are the things he learned. Salt opened boils. Mustard plaster lessened ailments of the liver. He was a virtuoso, practically, with nasty winter coughs. A baby rash? He happily practiced on Dewey.

"Just grind up some old wheat and brown it on the stove. It will do wonders. Wonders!" he said to Noralee.

He also practiced being a diplomatist, as he would put it coyly.

"A baroness," he said to Lizzy, for example, who visited with Daisy, a prairie dumpling of the finest kind. No wonder Lizzy

melted. She smiled at him. He smiled at her. He shuffled and took a deep breath. "A quarter is all that I ask."

"Would June be soon enough?" she said, while coloring a little. "I still owe some small pittance to the grocer."

"Oh, sure. No trouble. None."

"You're sure?"

"Of course. Just pay me whenever you can." That was America for you—giving assistance where it was needed, and credit where credit was due.

In gratitude, she spread the word. From near and far the settlers brought their maladies into the makeshift office he opened as a double in a corner of his barn, behind a tattered blanket on two hooks.

He learned from the Wichita Hebrews: he charged what the market would bear. But he never forgot his own roots; he had the community spirit. He did necks and ankles for free.

Very quickly, Doctorjay turned prosperous. When illness or misfortune struck, you could depend on him to arrive in a flying gallop.

When Herbert Krahn stepped on a rusty nail, Doctorjay announced the perfect remedy: he soaked the puncture first with a parsley brew, then in thick milk to neutralize the poison. The foot healed in no time at all; the money went to Doctorjay; the credit went to Caroline.

By leaps and bounds, his reputation grew.

A bull gored a good neighbor in the buttocks, and Doctorjay put axle grease upon the open wound and then blew wood smoke across the cut. It healed so well, his wife announced, you barely saw the scar.

Doctorjay gloried in the splendor of his role. The deacons praised his stomach bitters right from the Sunday pulpit. The haughtiest neighbor shriveled right before his eyes when he as much as hinted: "That tooth looks dubious to me!"

When the envious Wichita doctors came to spy out the bonesetter's secrets, Doctorjay was ready and waiting for them.

"Here, gentlemen. This way. Come right on in," cried Doctorjay, his whiskers straight up in the air.

The bureaucrats tried bullying: "You practice medicine without a proper license. Last week, you treated a sprained wrist. Did you, or did you not?"

"Huh? Huh? My hearing isn't what it used to be. Just ask around. Ask anyone at all."

"Where did you go to school?"

"Tried once. Can read a little. Have had an aversion to books ever since."

They threatened with the sheriff; they swore they would summon the law.

He pointed out the obvious. He counteracted biblically. Could they tax a quiet prayer? Could they license a handshake? That's all he had done—spoken a prayer and shaken a hand. Like so!

They winced at his grasp and departed with haste—no doubt chain-smoking all the way to Wichita. The Lutheran bonesetter beamed.

A solid beginning was there; the rest was now up to the Lord, and He was generous and fair; the grain had ripened nicely; the yield had been superb. If you held up your end of the bargain, He would do likewise, verily.

Therefore, of sermons, you could never have enough.

They were proud of their new place of worship. By September it had walls. By November the roof was just about finished. It stood without pews—they would come soon. And wooden floors were planned as well—a luxury! Demurely they knelt in a row on the neatly packed mud to give thanks for a chance to do well.

Their victories did not come on a silver platter. Some people might expect that kind of bounty from the sky, but not Doctorjay, nor his neighbors and friends or their ladies.

Life was still hard, but you supported the newly-formed Chamber of Commerce. You put your shoulder to the wheel. You pushed. That was the way to carve yourself a life in Mennotown.

Rains would still wash roofs away; and walls would tumble, mud heaps, onto bedding. In the summer, Lizzy's calves would moan and shuffle with mosquitoes; they lost their tails to frost-bite in the winter.

But still. This was democracy. Still there were freedom, leisure and diversion. Democracy was wonderful and everybody had a chance. Democracy was everywhere in force and leveled all distinctions.

# Chapter 17

While on the modern continent, modernity was on the march, there was still Apanlee—as stately as its legendary oak, its Aryan roots deep in the Russian soil, its spreading branches giving shade and comfort to the clan and hideouts for the seasonal sparrows and swallows.

Apanlee was humming like a beehive, warmed into action by the sun, for Uncle Benny, too, albeit getting on in years, had found a bride-to-be and planned on getting married.

That was delightful news. Her name was Dorothy.

She looked as though she stepped out of the pages of a book—a girl in a colorful skirt. The neighborhood watched ardently. The gossip of that year had teeth like needles, but in the end, it was agreed: they had the keys to each other's emotions. He thirsted for knowledge, as always. She consisted of giving and serving. He did not distinguish himself with a plow, and his bones held the damp of the winter, but Dorothy gave him a quiet, mysterious strength; she never left his side.

He still put all his thoughts on paper. Her silence matched his words.

He parted her hair and gave her a kiss on the tip of her nose. She knew all was right with the world.

A love out of a storybook—a little manchild with his forehead always furrowed and his small feet in polished boots went forth and found himself a woman with a thousand golden freckles. To top it off, she was a reader, too—the moon in her novels shone brightly.

The outcome was astonishing to all.

Nobody had expected the exotic oddling to fall in love and marry, like everybody else, much less to follow up with fatherhood, but game was he in ways and means; the clan had sold him short; he did things slowly, day by day—while never losing sight.

The hunchback was, by then, so well-known for his genteel writings that a library in Petersburg was christened after him. He knew how to weigh words, knew how to read between the lines. He had beautiful manners and spoke in a temperate voice. He spoke, and he wrote, and the stubborn refrain?

Revolution.

"The peasant is free," wrote Uncle Benny, while dabbing his forehead with thin, trembling hands. "But what does he own? He is a serf in fact, if not in name. He still wears chains. He has no rights. He is no more than chattel."

He did not say: "Equality." Nobody would have recognized the word. The dread of which he spoke still had no content and no focus, but what the people saw was this: deep in its marrow nested sacrilege. Deep at its core sat Hebrew thought. The swindle and the flimflam. The sidelocks. The yarmulkes.

Consensus was vociferous. The German farmers of that decade, to a body loyal subjects to the tsars, had not the slightest wish to have their status altered. It would have been like cheating on their bargain with the Lord.

Go into any forest, was their convincing argument. Beneath that vast and universal sky, no two trees are alike, and neither, in this world, are we.

All men, on even terms, regardless of the march of history that sorted kernels from the chaff?

"If you ask them: 'What do you want?' they'll tell you: 'More!'" said Alexander angrily.

He did not like the Jews. He was the heir to Apanlee. He echoed wide-held sentiment when it came to the Hebrews. The Jewish hatred of the tsarist sovereignty was known.

Had he had fancy words, which he did not—since Alexander, for his part, read no one's book beyond its first ten pages—he might have told his crippled nephew that parity might be a mandate that looked all right in theory. In poetry. Perhaps in the Beyond.

Not in the German villages. Not in the lush, green fields where status was determined, not by who had the loftiest dreams, but by who grew the finest grain—a grain which, by that time, fed a good part of Russia.

The invalid would not be silenced. "The chains corrode. And what I see is chaos. Anarchy. And mayhem in the streets."

The glitter of the oddling's words! He was half-kin, this little pundit relative of theirs, but he was genial to have around; his heart was above guile. You bent and patted Uncle Benny on the head. "Be sure not to forget your herbs. Here, let me prop you up."

The tsars, still hostile to all reckless change, might listen to the cripple's mediating ways—and his opinions, itching, like woolen underwear, were honored if not heeded—but it was widely understood at Apanlee: go work your fingers to the bone. Leave words to Uncle Benny.

He could put words to thought. He was a stubborn gnome.

"Now is the time to write new rules. The margin for error is small."

There were respectful nods. Not everyone was called by destiny to lend his suntanned arms to bring the kernels in, but nature had its compensations, clearly. It was agreed that Uncle Benny was an oddity but harmless—bred to the sturdy family by accident.

A Christian didn't waiver in his Faith.

Another century would soon begin to test the ancient Faith by heaping hurdle upon hurdle, but oldsters heard the children's prayers, and youngsters paid attention, with care and with due deference, to what their Elders said. Nobody differed with the Elders, for it was they who watched the covenant, struck up a century ago between the German-speaking farmers, the Lord Almighty, and the tsars.

"You render unto Caesar only after you have rendered unto God," said Alexander. "Now, should I close that window, Uncle Benny, so you won't catch the draft?"

Let Uncle Benny scribble or take his pensive walks. So let him craft his ornamental essays on the history of early settlers who coveted the soil. Those soft and rosy hands with flawless fingernails were good for little else.

You never saw the cripple without his pen and paper. By then, his hair had whitened to the color of fir ashes. He liked strong tea and brittle biscuits, and loved to have his blankets warmed.

For his mind, he was widely respected; for his delicate health, he was tenderly coddled as well. Not the worst Tartar of a cousin grudged Uncle Benny his hot water bottle or would have dreamed of sneezing lustily when Uncle Benny napped.

His joints—in constant spasms. His forehead—always knit.

And yet, he fell in love with Dorothy. Stripping corn one hazy summer afternoon, amid the youths of Apanlee, while gathering some anecdotes with which to spruce his paper, Uncle Benny was the lucky bachelor who found the husk with ochre kernels.

"Look what I have here. Look!" he called, and held the ear aloft.

According to an ancient custom, this find was a clear mandate for romance. In a fine mood for merriment, the youngfolk cheered him on and clapped their hands: "Come on, Uncle Benny! Come on! A kiss from the girl of your choice!"

His smart, dark eyes fell on a girl believed to have several

admirers.

"Do you permit?" he asked, a shy but faultless suitor, standing first on one frail leg, then shifting to the other.

The girl leaned forward, reddening. What else could she have done?

He reached for her. She did not back away. And as he held her in his arms, the farthest spectators could see: a glow washed over Uncle Benny.

The audience laughed and clapped. "A kiss. A kiss."

His lips touched Dorothy's warm cheek and sent the color to her nape, and afterwards, she stood so close to him she saw herself reflected in the shine of several silver buttons—and Uncle Benny, so the story goes, threw his cane in an arch across the nearest fence and, briefly, walked with a decided bounce, as straight as you and I.

A winter came and went. The gutters started dripping with the changing of the season. Spring cleaning had arrived at Apanlee, a ritual that started with the double window panes and ended with the polishing of the door knobs.

When every tree trunk had received a brand new coat of paint, the woolen underwear was packed, and the stork had completed his nest, Alexander slapped his crippled nephew on the shoulder and told him, man to man:

"We all know how you feel. It's not unnatural." And everybody laughed.

The year was fragrant; the ancient acacias stood clouded in bloom. The snow had long melted; the air smelled of spring and rebirth; the maid-servants polished the windows. Spring sat securely in the trees, and Apanlee would never again be as lovely.

Uncle Benny took his time pursuing Dorothy with the finesse of Apanlee, riding with two splendid horses, their breast harness shiny, their ropes a garish red. He drew a lot of stares and many speculations. He flicked the whip across the horses' ears and just sailed by, a gentle light in his dark eyes, the wind atop his

curly hair while on his way—like any other man in love—to take his heart to Dorothy.

The neighborhood took part in the developing romance. The neighbors told each other, laughingly: "Look, Uncle Benny is afire. You better call the fire brigadiers."

There was no malice in their teasing; he was no threat to anyone.

They two were soon detected holding hands beneath the table cloth. And by the time the wheat beards came and went, he and his chosen girl seemed handcuffed to each other, and every spinster was an expert, by September, at guessing this and that.

Love has its ways, they sighed and stared into a misty past. Not since the world began had it been otherwise. The wrinkles in his brow would lessen; that was their sentiment. He was in love, and so was she; they mesmerized each other thoroughly, much to the clan's surprise—though all the while, throughout his courtship even, he kept on writing frantic editorials none at Apanlee had time to read—not while a strong, hot summer drove the harvests.

Russian workers came from miles away—some from as far away as Poltawa—scythes swung across their shoulders.

The menfolk spit into their calluses and then took, singing, to the fields. The women clattered with the dishes in the kitchen; the chickens were already hanging by their legs. But as soon as the kernels were gathered, the villagers rallied, enthralled—it was urgent, no doubt, to start practicing songs, for a wedding was not far away.

*". . .My thoughts are as free*
*as wind o'er the ocean*
*And no one can see*
*their form or their motion. . ."*

No longer did the cripple sit in silence, in discourse with himself. He snapped the reign across his horses' pointed ears, taking off each Sunday morning in clouds of dust that whirled behind him, en route to visit Dorothy, as snatches of the teasing,

haunting melody would waft behind him slowly:

*". . . no hunter can find them*
*no trap ever bind them;*
*my lips may be still*
*but I think what I will."*

It was a happy time for all. He borrowed chiseled words for Dorothy— he loved to hear her sing; she had a lovely voice:

*"Though prison enfolds me*
*its walls cannot hold me*
*No captive I'll be*
*While my spirit is free. . ."*

Sometimes they sang together on mellow evenings, while neighbors listened pensively to the blows of the flails in the shed. They watched her lean against him cozily, and Uncle Benny's furrowed, melancholy face would soften from her love.

The folks of Apanlee inspected Dorothy, but she passed muster easily. She was a gentle shadow who only raised her voice at intervals: "Let Uncle Benny pass! Let Uncle Benny pass!"

She cooked and baked and scrubbed, with nary a thought for herself. She was busy from dawn until dark. She was an expert with the measles. Her peppernuts, perfection. Her mashed potatoes, without lumps. She never drove a beggar from her gate. Her milk pails, scoured every week, did not fall short on gloss. She easily turned out to be as frugal and as orderly as any girl around, and she was modest, too—the world with all its vanities was not for Dorothy.

"You first. You first," said Dorothy to old and young alike.

She was like that. Demure. She promised everybody many times that she would welcome relatives, no matter how obscure the kin—yes, welcome each and every one of them with open arms and willing smiles, and even if they overstayed and didn't go away.

She was a Catholic, regrettably. A Volga girl, they say. But then, well, wasn't he part Jew?

Some oldsters had long memories.

Some people still recalled with deep and heaving sighs: a sickly child in olden days, packed in protective rugs and furs, hot bricks stuffed all around him. And now, behold: a well-respected publisher. With distressing and upsetting notions.

The tsar had told his ministers: "The Jews are nine-tenths of the trouble."

It didn't loom, but it was there. It was an understanding. Each one of them, infested with the democratic spirit. You better cut an arc.

The Hebrews were the kind who'd fooled the world for centuries.

They ate unhealthy food.

They always traded up and never lost a deal.

They were the kind that made the dunces pull their chestnuts from the fire.

By definition, furthermore, they were non-Christians—no icons on their walls! Why, even Jesus warned: "Jerusalem! Jerusalem!"

Converting them was futile. That's why nobody tried.

"The Jews—in a destructive mood," that was the sentiment, nursed and recycled intermittently through centuries.

That year saw workers' strikes in Kiev, Petersburg and Moscow. Their favored slogan: Liberty. Their battle cry: Equality. Their claim: Fraternity.

Their target: the wealth of the nobles and tsars.

Assorted tsars had tried to bring equality through needed land reform, with dubious results. The serfs had since been freed—but to what thankless end? Child labor was a crime; child loitering, on the increase. The workers in the factories, whose wages had been doubled and doubled yet again, spoke openly of Revolution. The Hebrews carried on in undertones for hours at a time.

"Show me a fire sale," said Alexander, furious, "and there they are, to take advantage of somebody else's tragedy. You have to put up barriers."

He listened sullenly while Uncle Benny told of peasants pricking veins and writing crimson letters, petitioning the tsars. All people, equal brothers? The world, a giant brotherhood? No social barriers between a village herdsman and his overlord?

"No wonder," Alexander scolded Uncle Benny while stuffing pillows in the hollow of his back, "that our tsars have many foes."

"There's worse to come, unless there is a chance for democratic—"

"Oh, hush you, Uncle Benny!"

A fine one, he, to speak! He was a bloodless pundit. He had been sheltered all his life. He had his bed warmed and his darning done, thanks to the vast abundance that came with Apanlee.

"What do they want? What do the workers want?"

"Well, parity. A chance to share. A chance to partake in the structure of the government—"

But Alexander merely shrugged his shoulders. In Heaven, parity was proper, but only after you made room for Christ—a thought anathema to certain folks who, given their one chance, had crucified Him wantonly.

He had heard of this social practice called democracy—rule by collective ignorance. Not here. Not in the plains of Russia.

Alexander did not want to argue with his crippled nephew whose hobby was philosophy. In the vicinity of Apanlee, where people born to privilege were raised to duty and example among their watchful relatives, the concept of equality was as germane as might have been the moon on a long, sun-drenched day.

"As much against the laws of nature," was Alexander's final word, "as is a bearded lady."

"If not reform—"

"All right. I heard you out."

"—then bloodshed, Alexander."

"Now, not another word!" said Alexander angrily, a man who died twelve years before the Lusitania sank, and that was just as well.

Everyone was greatly pleased and mollified, therefore, when Uncle Benny, if only temporarily, could think of something other than the trouble with the land, its restive peasantry, and stop forecasting pestilence as winter started stripping every tree.

All loved him well enough. They greeted his romantic flowering with outstretched hands and hoped it would lessen his headaches.

"So then? Your living quarters in the right wing or the left?"

They knew that Uncle Benny could no more have changed the well-established order than he could make the month of August come before July.

"Whatever suits you best," said Uncle Benny, a tiny groom but so revered in Russia for words that leashed enormous thought that trains would wait for him. The tsars prized his opinion. Ink foamed from what he said. "I would prefer upstairs. It's quiet there. I won't be underfoot."

A female cousin stroked his hands—those nervous hands that were as delicate as butterflies, that browsed in mildewed papers.

"You will be happy. Finally." She smiled at him, a pleasant and good-natured girl. She put a kindly hand across his burning brow. "We all wish you luck. The servants are spoiling their saints."

Said Uncle Benny softly while dropping a small tear: "Before it is too late."

He was like that. He gloomed and doomed and sorrowed and forewarned.

"Gone are the days," wrote Uncle Benny with ever greater urgency in essay after essay, after searching through old scrolls, "when Faith alone suffices."

Even at the height of his own love affair, that made him shower Dorothy with pretty lyrics as though he showered her with jewels, he was as stubborn as a muzhik when it came to his theories.

The Russian servants pulled threads from Uncle Benny's overcoat, to have a little keepsake and help along his luck. His health was frail and getting worse. His back could not withstand a har-

vest; his eyes could not withstand the August sun; he barely made it through September; and come the winter storms, the chill crept deep into his marrow and wouldn't go away.

The doctors, to a voice, expressed their bafflement.

But now he had a bride. That would change everything. On a long Easter weekend, they spoke their wedding vows.

The tables stood laden with food; wreaths hung in ribbons from the rafters; the guest list reached into Siberia and Tashkent. You never saw so many cousins all at once!

The vaguest relatives arrived from far away to partake in the drollery. The bridegroom looked so elegant and satisfied with luck that you surmised he thought he was entitled to a ballerina. The elders seated themselves; the young drew into a cluster. Claas Epp, the fieriest preacher of his time, strode forward, took the pulpit, and spoke a double blessing fore and aft to forestall adverse luck.

The bride—as lovely as the morning star. God, was she beautiful! And pure!

Somebody took the bride's white garland: "Surrender now your wreath, for life is but a shadow—"

The barefoot peasants, standing by, wept copiously. "God be with you. The martyrs and saints protect you."

Uncle Benny kept checking the hands of his watch.

"It's late. It's later than you think," said Uncle Benny urgently, and everybody laughed out loud at the well-known refrain that Uncle Benny had been echoing since he had been a little boy who started cracking print.

In the end, the excitement died down; the newlyweds left, behind them the blur of well-wishers.

"Be gone!"

"Be glad!"

"And be happy! Be happy! Be happy!"

# Chapter 18

About that time, a bunch of strangers came to Mennotown. They came in from the East, thick with old dust, walking in formation, and wouldn't say from where.

That was the first thing everybody noticed. They weren't neighborly.

From the word go, the Donoghues were trouble. They stayed all summer long, but lifted not one little finger to help bring in the harvests, and even when the wind began to bite in earnest, they gave no sign of leaving. They holed up in a temporary shack, and there they sat and stayed.

Their fences sagged, their hairlines weren't tidy, their nails needed scrubbing and trimming. If something was wobbly, they claimed they lacked hammer and nail. They were notorious for their rages and unreasonable demands. Like locusts they lived even then, devouring things that other people grew.

Even their dogs looked slightly ashamed. Their toes kept on kicking up dust.

It was whispered that jail fever ran in their veins. They talked

of an old, missing document that gave them squatters' rights. They were cozy with Wichita's Jews.

At first, the faithful offered guarded welcome.

"Come join us, please," the congregation told the Donoghues. "He shed His blood for everyone. We'll just move over and make room. The church takes every sinner."

"If we don't oversleep," replied the Donoghues.

"We are counting on you," said Lizzy, helplessly, setting up a gentle counter-current while waiting for results.

Lizzy wanted all her neighbors to behave harmoniously, and so she launched herself. To start, she was a gifted cook. She took her husband firmly by the arm and went right in the lion's den to welcome them in person.

"Will you come visit us next Sunday, right after services?" Let them see for themselves! Who owned the shiniest sill? Who owned the finest herds, the fattest geese, the most well-mannered children? A set of perfect strangers to judge who was the winner in a contest that started centuries ago!

"I'll fry my finest rooster," said Noralee as well.

Not that it made a difference. She found out soon enough. To spurn a Sunday supper invitation was an unthinkable rebuff. The Donoghues, ungrateful louts, snubbed Noralee. Repeatedly. And never gave a reason.

"Please come," she begged, refusing to believe: you couldn't set fire to water.

"Do you suppose they could be non-believers?" chimed Lizzy finally, distressed beyond all words.

Nobody ruled that out. Some claimed that they had spied a barrister named Finkelstein, who visited the Donoghues at intervals to try to do a little mischief on the side. The dogs would bark at him.

Still Lizzy, being Lizzy, tried—no one could say she didn't. She was armed with the patience of Job. In later years, she often said she wished she had a dime for every time she tried; she would be a rich woman.

Getting the Donoghues to church grew into a moral crusade. The neighbors, watching from the sidelines, predicting that worse was to come—this long before she, Lizzy, learned about their double-faced shenanigans, the trouble Abigail would cause, the worm in the core of the apple.

Despite repeated efforts, it proved impossible to trace from whence they came. That they were here to stay, of that there seemed no doubt.

"Unhappily," they claimed repeatedly, "the document is lost."

But they were looking. They were searching.

And once they found that missing document and took it to the Hebrew barrister, the fat was in the fire.

In weeks to come, as apprehension and alarm increased, all kinds of aberrations came to light about the Donoghues. Their menfolk slept into the day; their females wore old petticoats on which the lace had frayed. They did not like to be observed. If you tried catching up to them, they quickened their own pace.

They passed for parasites and maybe even worse. They drew no solace from the Bible. Their children ran in rags.

The difference between potatoes planted early and potatoes planted late was a decided mystery to them. They were so poor, because of sloth, they counted on the mushroom season.

Before another year was gone, people told them to their faces what they thought.

The Donoghues, for their part, kept pointing out their squatters' rights; they boasted they had Indian blood; it was the Germans, claimed the Donoghues, who were the real intruders.

Some people grumbled, even then, about their clannish faithfulness and appetite for exclusivity, but they just shrugged that off, for plenty of goodwill was there to enable adjusting. Adapting. Most folks in Mennotown took pride in triple loyalties. In every sod home could be found the picture of the German kaiser and equally the picture of the Russian tsar—but, flanked by both, the current president in Washington, a man who took his baths on

Saturday, like everybody else.

Meanwhile, they built up their community. The German church grew overnight; the building meant to be the German school progressed more slowly. They planned every detail with care, all winter long, with abacus and ruler and many cups of coffee from Lizzy's iron kettle.

"We'll all chip in," they said. "Nobody is excused."

Jan Neufeld was there, from beginning to end, a youth progressive to the hilt. "The railroad," said young Jan, "has plans to move right through our town. The sale of one small parcel will spell a large amount of cash. I'm willing to donate a hefty chunk to speed our youngfolks' schooling. The railroad will donate the lumber."

The settlers looked at him approvingly. Here was a fellow with a purpose. Though he himself had scarcely been to school, he came from Apanlee; he valued education. Each summer bronzed him more; each harvest made him sturdier. The plow no longer jumped out of his hands as it had that first year when he was still a novice plowman.

"We'll search the state from end to end," said Jan, and raised a hand until the visitors grew still: "Now, silence. Everyone! Books. Teachers. Somebody well-equipped to see the future clearly."

The wind whistled softly. The barn filled with tobacco smoke. A train roared by and broke the silence briefly. Trains moved so fast they were a blur; trains never ceased to stun.

The kerosene lamp flickered.

Somebody offered an opinion: grain loaders, surely, were bound to drop in price.

Male neighbors far and wide flocked in for company. Cracking walnuts with a hammer, they'd steer the talk away from Jan's concern for schooling to more immediate matters: the crops, the weather, the still-arriving immigrants the ships pushed through the cold and gray Atlantic.

There was talk of a bicycle shop.

Farmer Ens had made his final payment on his fancy thresh-

ing gear.

Farmer Goertzen was busily buying up land in the north.

Herbert's newest neighbor to the right was fortunately German, though not, to everyone's regret, of the true Faith. As yet.

A Methodist? Could be. Or, worse, a Presbyterian? Could be as well. You never knew. You never, never knew.

You were grateful he wasn't a Baptist, for they were serious competition. Some of them even rode the trains to speed from town to town to snare the credulous.

"We need that school," insisted Jan. He did not easily give up. Accosting neighbors left and right, he handed each a pen and said: "Here. On the dotted line."

"Sure. Sure. Why not? Within ten years I might be dead. But in the meantime, why not spend a bit on chalk and blackboard? A pointed ruler? And a bell?" That year, the harvest was so good that even well-known misers felt expansive.

It wasn't that their offspring's schooling didn't matter. It was slow going, though. The seasons marched. The children's nimble hands and feet were needed. Most folks knew that the Bible was the place where you learned everything worth knowing.

Faith, in those early years of pioneering, was writ in large, stiff, Gothic script. The preachers continued to filter the Gospel. The Holy Ghost plowed through the souls of disbelievers.

The Elders did a copious business between the sinners and the Great Beyond, for if you knew what was and would be good for you—not just today but in eternity—when you saw them, you'd better reach into your pockets! The church came first. The school, a distant second.

Building that little red schoolhouse took several additional years.

But in the end, Jan won; he learned to speak firmly and stick out his chin. That chin was his grandfather's chin—some oldsters still remembered.

Thus, on a snowy afternoon, the Mennotown neighbors assembled in Herbert's new barn and voted themselves a commit-

tee.

"It's now—or else," insisted Jan, and therefore it was now.

They planned the school, located at the crossroads, right next to the half-finished church. Jan kept on pushing for completion until the men agreed to thatch the roof, ornery weather regardless, with bundling reeds and chinking logs.

Lizzy fired up her quilting bee to buy a black, round stove, a blackboard, and a desk. Lizzy had the community spirit. She volunteered her brand-new, add-on parlor all summer to finish the drive.

"The best is barely good enough," she told the quilting ladies, who nodded solemnly and fanned the flies away, although, by this time, Lizzy had four cross-draft windows, paid for out of her butter fund. But still, the flies crept in. Each Wednesday afternoon, the quilting bee ladies sat, quilting happily within the summer breeze—updating the gossip they'd missed.

When the school stood finished—finally!—they looked around: who might be a fitting teacher?

"Thirty dollars for the year," the school committee had allowed. "Three bins of wheat. Oodles of firewood thrown into the bargain. The right to own a cow. And all the food a poor fellow can swallow—for free."

Johann Wiebe was the first of many prairie teachers—a lanky fellow from up north, straight from the windy plains. He was a meek and gentle man, unsuited for the land, afraid to raise his voice. Blisters formed as easily on his soft palms as bubbles did in Lizzy's zwieback dough. Not yet eighteen when he was signed, he was a serious lad, bookish to the hilt. In years to come, he was the one who cast a timid eye on Lizzy's young Hermine. For now, he did the best he could; he made Hermine, still a child, stop staring dreamily out of the window and start to do her numbers properly, by counting on her fingers.

Before the year was out, he learned that teaching was no bed of roses. One frosty, wind-blown morning, he pushed his hat down on his ears and knocked on Doctorjay's front door. Mar-

shalling all his fortitude, he pointed to Doctorjay's wallet.

"A globe. A map. And certainly a dictionary. These are necessities."

Doctorjay, a man with a heart as wide as a barn, agog with admiration for any fluent reader, reached for his wallet then and there, all set to empty it, but Noralee was quick and caught his fingers just in time.

A dictionary, with print so small that it could ruin your eyesight? A globe that made you think you hung there, in the middle of the universe, with not a hook or safety net to counteract the fear that you might drop into a pit? A map highlighting sinful places, such as California?

"Make do with what you have," she said, and glared with purpose at the door.

"I will, I will," said the young teacher, hastily, and never asked again.

When Noralee, while joining in the quilting bee, spelled out the teacher's plea on behalf of the inquisitive spirit, the ladies, to a body, were equally incensed. Why learn about a world of which they had no part? Such extra frills cost money, and money was still scarce.

School had its place when nature rested up. By bobsled and buggy they came, the clean-scrubbed, flaxen children, when days were slow and snow lay thick outside. Their bashful teacher saw to it that, in the frozen season, there would be ample silent reading, along with writing from dictation, along with careful penmanship.

All winter long, the German youngsters learned their ABCs and other useful matters, and for good reason, too—because more often than the school committee liked, some busybody bureaucrats arrived out of Topeka where government was spreading tentacles like mad.

The bureaucrats asked unbecoming questions:

"Why so much Bible reading in your schools at the expense of other books?"

"Why prayers but no algebra?"

Mennotown thought little of the people in Topeka who kept trying on this governor, that governor as if he were a glove. As far as politics, you knew precisely what was good for you; you held yourself aloof.

"Your absent list is a disgrace," scolded the bureaucrats.

They even threatened fiercely: "One day in jail for every day one of your children misses school—"

Harsh editorials appeared in the *Emporia Gazette* about the German children's schooling. "There is for their curriculum," the worldly write-ups claimed, "no proper explanation."

The papers twisted facts. The scribblers tainted truth. There was an explanation. The harvests interfered.

It wasn't true that the beleaguered settlers didn't try to please the bureaucrats. "A bureaucrat must make a living, too," they said repeatedly. "But how to fight the calendar?"

The farmers huddled in distress. "It's spring," the farmers said. "We need all hands. Nobody is excused."

School? Books? It was well known that too much studying caused water on the brain. School was a fancy luxury for useless winter days; spring was already here and gone; soon every son and daughter would be needed to wrestle in the sheaves.

Year after year, it was the same. As soon as trees dressed up like brides, the schoolhouse doors fell shut.

The straw piles grew.

The horse-drawn drill squeaked fiercely.

The threshing crews arrived.

Somebody's cousin put himself in charge of the entire caravan that hauled the bulging sacks of grain to Wichita. He let the children ride along so they could aggravate the meter maids who ticketed the horses.

Wagon after horse-drawn wagon halted by the elevators in Wichita as the grain flowed to the pit below. Wheat sold, by then, for 70 cents a bushel. There was disturbing talk the price of grain might drop. Speed was, hence, of the essence. You had no

choice; the children were recruited; you could not waste their hands. If nothing else, a child could lead a horse aside to find relief at intervals and thus aid calls of nature—in English, if need be.

"As soon as you hear whirring wheels, run! Run and hide in the potato cellar!" Noralee coached Dewey cleverly and kept her truant offspring out of sight of bookish bureaucrats until the dust had settled on the snoopers.

The Donoghues were dropping hints, and Doctorjay became all eyes and ears. He elbowed Lizzy pointedly. "They're whispering about the document again!"

"They do? What document?"

"What document? As if you didn't know!"

"No, I don't know," said Lizzy sharply. "And I don't want to know."

"There's trouble brewing, Lizzy. They are cavorting with this barrister named Finkelstein."

"I paid for it. We had a deal. This land is mine. The law is on my side." A scoundrel had sold her a pigeon-caked hut; he took her coins and ran; should she have given chase?

"Was there a bill of sale?"

"Maybe. I may have put it in my apron. I may have washed that apron."

She acted nonchalant, but deep inside she worried more than she let on. She knew the Donoghues' persistent talk about a squatter claim to prime land in the midst of Mennotown was like a tune that played inside Jan's skull. It was obnoxious, caused much anguish, and wouldn't go away, and even Doctorjay—the only Democrat in a town dependably Republican, a man who customarily took sides with any underdog, who saw it his life's task to help erase class differences—would trumpet heartily into his checkered handkerchief with stress when he heard of this matter. Not even he could warm his heart to any of the Donoghues—excepting, perhaps, Abigail, who was a well-known hussy.

"That one is fun to watch," said Doctorjay, pleased that this female stranger came endowed with curves and loops where you expected them to be on any fetching female.

The rest of them were thin and nervous, and no wonder: their meals were sporadic and meager; their stew was watery and thin.

That was the second feature everybody noticed—their skinniness—particularly Noralee who, by then, carried so much weight she could no longer take a chance on perching on her stool.

Both Noralee and Lizzy thought Abigail alarming. They fussed and worried plenty.

Here was a girl as tricky as a Tartar foe, as tempting as a chunk of meat just turning on the spits. She wore a dress with four contrasting colors and didn't regard herself as a sinner. You watched her. She meant business.

Before the year was out, the girl was the talk of the town. To put it bluntly: Abigail was trouble. And Jan stood in her path.

When Lizzy, filled with dread, consulted Doctorjay to help her think of a deterrent, he cast a jaundiced eye on Little Melly and swallowed just in time what he had meant to say.

"Don't be caught napping, Little Melly," warned Doctorjay, instead, and felt his ears grow crimson with a forbidden thought. "Wake up and smell the tulips."

The girl spoke placidly. "I don't know what you mean. If it is chiefly marriage Abigail is after, then Jan is probably as useless as a flower vendor in July. "

When Little Melly spoke those words, relief went straight into all ten of Lizzy's toes. Jan's course was set. His bride-to-be was waiting.

"You can't allow a horse to drift," said Doctorjay, who knew whereof he spoke.

# Chapter 19

Doctorjay and Noralee had a befitting marriage, all in all, despite the spice of many heated arguments the blasted bottle caused.

"Your disgraceful behavior is all over town," lamented Noralee at intervals.

"Nag-nag. More coffee, if you please, madam. Are you still mad at me?"

"I'm even madder now than last year, Doctorjay. Your tongue is spiked. Look at you! Look at your blood-shot eyes! There's only one conclusion."

"It isn't Abigail," he whined, outguessing her, expertly dulling her main arrow.

"The Finkelsteins? Did you cavort with them?"

"Why, Noralee!"

She was a realist. She would have been on guard against most any girl whose name was Abigail—but even more instinctively was she on guard against the clannish Finkelsteins who dealt, ostensibly, in furs.

The Wichita Hebrews—too clever for anyone's comfort!

She knew some facts - specifically, about the Finkelsteins. She carefully fleshed out the rest. Pen wipers, all! Foot scrapers, all! Hatred of cross-stitch was in their blood. They fasted without rhyme or reason—no wonder they were slim; no wonder they got rich.

"I treat all people equally. As an American, I owe that to myself to keep myself informed," claimed Doctorjay, and disappeared in a smart trot in the direction of another celebration that started after sunset and lasted way past midnight. If he ran into friends he hadn't seen in ages, he hung out for several additional rounds. Next thing he knew a song leaped to his tongue and stayed. Next thing that happened was: he started voting Democrat.

In Mennotown, he was the only one who did. His argument was simple. Somebody had to nullify the rising temperance movement, led chiefly by a female firebrand who was lambasting joy.

All this was hard on Noralee. She did her best to close her eyes and help him navigate back to safe shores at such disheveled times.

In time, they struck a compromise. She didn't dwell on his shortcomings—except for the drama that she could extract. He didn't dwell on imperfections either; he took her hollering in stride; he knew she knew that arguing against the flask was much like punching hard into a down comforter—sooner or later, she felt a bit foolish; she started to laugh; and he knew he had won one more round.

She knew her limitations. Her once-slim figure had long disappeared into layers of soft fat. Her eyes began to droop a bit, her hair was thinning out. That he found her attractive, still! was a decided plus.

She scolded, and she yelled—she didn't spurn her drama!—but that was as far as it went. She could have afforded to take a stern view—the Elders urged her to—but she didn't; it wasn't important.

She knew that it would pass. Subtract those few upsetting

times when Doctorjay returned from Wichita so sloshed she would have gladly strangled him—and she was still in Doctorjay's young eyes a lavish luxury to snuggle up against when he came home from having sat all night while waiting for a cow to calve, a boil to burst, a life to end as nature ran its course. He was a good provider. They had enough children to sweeten the future—each one of them, a hearty appetite!—and their harvests were heavy and lush.

One year became the next—years filled with Faith and certitude—with their beloved church a hub of bustle in the middle, the homesteads the spokes, one hymn chasing after another. Their young sat mannerly in church with shining eyes and silent lips, smelling sweetly of mothballs and wax.

To counteract the fire sap that kept on leading Doctorjay astray, the moral force in years to come proved to be Dewey Epp. His last name wasn't really Epp; no one remembered Jacob; he must have felt a kinship with Old Willy, who had since passed to his reward. This was the selfsame Dewey Epp, the sallow preacher boy, whom Doctorjay had raised out of his soggy diapers as though he were his son. Young Dewey showed his earmarks early. Nobody could say grace at supper time with such hypnotic singsong voice.

"Just looking at the little fellow," predicted Doctorjay, "makes me suspect a sermon's coming on. He'll soon start pilfering my pockets."

"He's going to accomplish wonders," his wife said hopefully, while watching her husband digesting his dinner.

"Wonders?"

"Wonders."

"Why wonders, Noralee?"

"Because," said Noralee.

It turned out she was right. In coming years, few sinners managed to escape the sway of Dewey's dogged sermons. But until Dewey grew into his preacher trousers and his calling, her lusty husband did exactly as he pleased, saw whom he liked, slept

where he fell, attended church depending on who preached, ignoring practically every prairie sermonizer, but favoring a few.

He had no quarrel with the Elder Thiessen, for example.

The Elder Thiessen was as bland as gruel without salt. Most people flocked to him because he was a middle-roader. He had no bone to pick with anyone, since he was blind in his left eye and therefore prone to missing flaws two eyes might have noted.

The Elder Thiessen was content to watch the sinners hang their heads and sort out their trespasses. He left them there, no fuss. He made his rounds to speak his prayers for the dead and marry waiting couples. He told the congregation of the birth of God and of the mercies of the crucified Redeemer, and Doctorjay sang lustily to that—a preacher to his liking. He told fine jokes about two skunks who quarreled over whisky, and Doctorjay laughed roaringly and slapped himself with relish on the thighs: "And have you heard the one about three Lutherans, two Presbyterians and a Jew?"

But when the Elder Penner from Fargo, North Dakota, arrived one windy afternoon to pitch his tent and settle down to brimstone, you could not locate Doctorjay—not even with a magnifying glass.

Young Dewey was an odd, peculiar little fellow—a boy with pasty skin, a furrowed brow and wide and flaring nostrils who puckered up his lips to make barbarian noises. Whenever he did that, Little Melly just fled for her life.

It gnawed on Lizzy like a moth chews on a garment: the pious preacher child, her sister's favorite, was greasy to the touch. She did not like the boy. She could not put her finger on the source.

This shocked her to the core.

She said to Herbert finally: "If only he would blow his nose."

Herb brushed away some crumbs and said to Lizzy gently. "Don't be so harsh on your own heart."

"It isn't just his looks," she told herself severely, since she

agreed with Herbert. It was better not to examine too closely. But still—the boy was far from handsome. Every time she cut the youngster's hair—for she was excellent with scissors!—she saw that ugly mole growing at the base of his neck.

She kept on hugging her illusions that her unhealthy feelings would pass, for Dewey was, she told herself, a child like any other child, a relative like any other relative, entitled to her loyalty. It was her Christian duty to quench uncharitable thoughts—although the teacher was complaining too, for Dewey Epp was often late to class, slinking in with downcast eyes, using twice his allotment of paper.

"A good, obedient son," claimed Noralee. "He'll grow to be a useful missionary."

"That would be wonderful," said Lizzy, who felt her heart swell with foreboding. She knew the congregation needed full-time preachers sorely to regulate the coming years with threats of hell and promises of Heaven. Why not her sister's son? Of preachers, you could never have enough. This outweighed all the rest—and even she had to admit: Dewey spoke his prayers, always, with a mysterious gravity.

She would catch herself staring at him. About him hung a maddening docility. At best, he was lukewarm about her butter balls—that she could overlook. He greeted guests and took their hats—at least he had some manners. He was as common as sliced turnip—she venerated that, since she lived in America.

But he frightened her geese into hissing at him, and the dogs tore holes in his trousers.

Little Melly came running one morning, in her excitement fanning herself: "Doctorjay! Doctorjay! You are due for a surprise! Dewey says he found the Lord."

"Where did he look for him?" asked Doctorjay and stroked the stubble on his chin.

"Somebody needs to prod your conscience," protested Little Melly with unexpected gusto. "You're overdue yourself to catch up with the Lord." Churchly zeal was one thing she and her little

brother had in common.

For Little Melly, the devil was real. He had two hooves, a tail. About him, the odor of brimstone. The devil held full sway in Mennotown, she knew, unless the healer stopped his guzzling; there was no stopping him.

"It's never too soon," chirped Little Melly while wringing her short fingers, "to have a timely update with the Lord."

Doctorjay was still attending church at his convenience, spottily, oblivious of the peril to his soul. Little Melly saw the writing on the wall when she saw Doctorjay take off to Wichita when yet another president had yet another birthday—take off to Wichita upon his trotter, a flag pinned to his saddle as though the village didn't know that this was camouflage. In matters that important, she sided with the elders who stockpiled vehemence for sinners. She put herself, therefore, no matter how demurely, on the hard side of rectitude.

Just being a plain Lutheran, she argued, while heating to the challenge, was simply not enough. She tugged at Doctorjay repeatedly: "Unwilling, still, to admit your being a sinner?"

He peered at her: "What do the gossips say?"

"Let conscience smite you now! You have become an object of suspicion."

"Me? In what way?"

"You tipped your hat to Abigail. What will the neighbors say?"

He kept on searching for a pillow on which to rest his head. "Now, listen, Little Melly. Don't be a worrywart."

"A worrywart? Who? Me?"

According to the gossip of that year, Doctorjay was laughing up his sleeve. Some people shrewdly guessed his secret might be Abigail.

"Well, I for one," said Noralee to Lizzy, reaching for a handle on Doctorjay's evasiveness, "hope fervently with all my heart for a diligent preacher to shed on my husband some helpful additional light."

Lizzy sprang to Doctorjay's defense at once. She offered, squirming gently: "What are you saying? Abigail?"

"You never know," admitted Noralee, enjoying looking gloomy.

"No way," said Lizzy firmly, dismissing all suspicion. She trusted Doctorjay. He was her valued neighbor, who stood by her through thick and thin. An honest man was Doctorjay—he wouldn't pick a berry from someone else's hedge.

"I trust your judgment, Lizzy. You're sure? You're absolutely sure?"

"Pay no attention, Noralee."

Let gossips say what gossips must; from deep and troubling sources came many murky stories. "I close my ears," said Lizzy stoutly, "to every one of them."

He was her friend. The man who led the Prairie Fire Drive was Doctorjay. The one who helped her tally the malingering church volunteers was Doctorjay. "He is an upright Christian, Noralee. You, more than anybody else, should know."

"Yes. True," admitted Noralee, still looking somewhat dubious. "Not easy being Lutheran in Mennotown, these days."

That was one weakness of the Ancient Faith; the rules were a bit lax; most anybody, even Doctorjay, could lay a claim to being genuinely Christian—unless it was your tribulation to have been born a Jew.

Once a month, the sisters would dress up to take themselves to Wichita to bargain with the Hebrews—Lizzy proudly cradling several balls of cheese and Noralee safeguarding half a dozen hens tied firmly by the legs.

"No trouble to hitch up my mare," the prospering bonesetter said. By the angle of his hat you could ascertain success; by the rolls of midriff you could tell the status of his woman.

Brisk gossip shortened the way into town. Updates about the neighborhood, especially the Donoghues, who had the oddest habits, kept everyone in stitches, particularly Noralee. She kept fanning herself with excitement. Her belly shook with mirth.

"A ring? You said a ring? A handshake—not enough?"

"That's what I said. A ring. A wedding ring. Believe you me. Or not."

A wedding ring was vanity, for everybody knew without a ring: just who was married, who was not. Who might be married soon? Who never had a chance? Why waste a ring to advertise the obvious—a thing so widely and so clearly understood? Good money thrown out the window!

It was fun to gossip away. It was fun to spy on your neighbor. They laughed so hard at times, all four of them, that even Doctorjay gasped for a handkerchief.

"Giddap!" yelled Doctorjay, as loudly as he could.

"Giddap," yelled Herbert, too, showing off his baronial horses.

The road to Wichita was dry. The prairie was a yellow sea of flowers. The two proud husbands sat up front, their ladies in the feather seat behind them, filling it from rim to rim. They loved to show themselves. In contrast to the Jews, who had forsaken Him when He gave them a chance to go to Heaven, in contrast to the Donoghues, whose fortunes went from bad to worse, the future smiled on them.

It wasn't just the Jews who lived a world apart. The Donoghues as well caused many heads to shake. The goose bumps wouldn't go away. Their customs were odd, like a blustery Christmas. They still marched Indian-file. They ate their carrots undercooked. Their dogs had an obnoxious bark. Their cats came without whiskers. They kissed each other on both cheeks and championed brotherhood. They talked about that missing document, while twittering with glee.

"They are inviting ruin," decided Lizzy angrily, who did not easily speak ill of either man or beast.

When Noralee tried visiting the Donoghues to find out some specifics, their gate was firmly locked, but when a strong wind gust blew open the door to their hut, she saw an unmade bed. Their turnip patch grew wild. They were a strange, disturbing family; their nearest relatives did not look like a relative at all.

They did not stand within the solid ring of harmony and showed no signs of joining. Most settlers held them in disdain. They had nothing in common with them.

In summary, the Donoghues had been weighed and found wanting.

"It was a lease and not a sale," they claimed while eyeing Lizzy's property. While heading home one hour after midnight, Doctorjay saw several of them shadow-boxing, which was the oddest sight.

"They're up to trouble. Verily!" he said that night to Noralee, who did not pay attention; who feared the wagging tongues about her guzzling husband more than the barley blight.

She scolded Doctorjay repeatedly, and in the voice of August thunder, to no avail at all. What vexed her most of all were his excuses, since she had heard them all. She nearly howled with insult when he retrieved, from thinnest air, the weakest one of all:

"I didn't watch the time. Before I realized it happened, the sun was going down."

"Let go of your flask! That's an order. Remember last week? It took an act of God to get you out of bed. Let me be clear about one thing. I don't need a wandering husband. Explain yourself at once."

The bonesetter put on his widest grin. "Will you believe me this time?"

He had this social talent, which he explained to her. You met a friend. You took a swig and passed around the bottle.

"Before I realized, the time just slipped away."

"What was his name?"

"How should I know? I don't remember names. Should I have asked for his biography?"

"Do you fancy yourself still in your carefree bachelor days? Who was it? Be specific."

"What's in a name? Don't ask me silly questions."

"Was he a she? Out with the truth. Confess." She took her

husband by the shoulders and moved him closer to the light. She shone the beam of scrutiny on him: "Did you, by any chance, run into Abigail?"

"Abigail? Did you say: 'Abigail'?"

"You heard me. Abigail."

She had his number pat. She sat there, sternly, dressed in a long, frayed nightshirt. She had stayed up to wait for him much later than the neighbors knew. "Out with the truth. Confess!"

On detail, he was foggy. He didn't want to be accused of something base without the benefit of memory. He peered at her, suspiciously. "Did anybody see me in her company?"

"Confess!"

"If I had something to confess, I would." Blind to her trembling lower lip, he launched into assault. "You don't have any faults?"

She started blowing steam as though she were a train. "I never ever in my entire life heard such a poor excuse! I hope I never will again! Midnight came. One o'clock. Two o'clock. Where were you, Doctorjay?"

"I told you several times already. I walked along the street and met a long-lost friend. We sat and talked. Updating on old news." He made an expert grab at her and held her, warm and squirming. "You have no foibles, madam?"

She struggled a bit, but he knew her weak places; he had explored them all; her limbs grew leaden; her glance turned soft; these things were overpowering. "You heard me. Where? Where were you?"

He was pleasantly giddy and wanted to share. "In the thick of confetti, that's where."

What was a wife to do? She lent a hand and steered him around corners. Without her help, he would have walked into a wall and, therefore, steer she did. "You are a pretty dreadful sight! The neighborhood is sneering in my face. You, a respected herbalist!"

Doctorjay winked fondly at his wife: an uneven struggle from the beginning. "I tried to leave. Time after time! The time just

slipped away. You don't believe your husband?"

"Not always. No."

"Say! Have I ever lied to you?"

"You have. You have. Don't tell me that you haven't. Was it this hussy, Abigail?"

"Naw! There you're wrong. A gentleman approaching sixty."

"No! You don't say."

"He grabbed me by the sleeve to tell me one more lark about the bearded lady. Come. How about a little schmoozy?"

"You're sure it wasn't Abigail?"

"I'm absolutely sure. Most definitely not." While he kept dishing out excuses, systematic as a bank, she jumped, remembering: "The mail pouch, Doctorjay!"

He blinked with shock. "What mail pouch?"

That was the moment when he sobered up. That's when he suddenly remembered with a clarity some people might have called clairvoyance: the loop came loose! The mare jumped at a shadow! "The mail pouch? Plunk! It dropped into the creek."

"No! Doctorjay! How could you!"

He spread both hands, defeated. "Gone. Plunk! No matter how I fished."

Poor Noralee! What would she do for entertainment now? For two long weeks? Until another pouch arrived?

"What? What?" cried Abigail, a master of duplicity, by then well on the road to tragedy. "No. You are wrong. Not Doctorjay! It isn't Doctorjay."

That was believable. A dalliance with a married man was inconceivable and almost unachievable.

As judged from the inflection in her voice, as hinted in her words, Abigail gave added cause for heated speculation. To guess what might come next was favorite entertainment, the daily drama coming in installments. For an entire season, the neighbors kept nodding to each other: I'm as much in the dark as you are.

The rumors didn't quit; they only shifted focus: "It's Abigail and Jan."

All eyes, by then, were firmly on the girl and on the hesitating bachelor who took his time, evasively in many people's estimate, to ask the question nature wanted him to ask.

Little Melly decided to speed up her chances. She pushed one foot in front of the other until she was touching Jan's knee. She kept shifting from left foot to right, aware that the cat had her tongue.

Jan's mind was on the future and on the missing document. He leaned back, forced a worry from his frown and asked. "Yes, Little Melly? What is it this time, honey?"

"Nothing."

"You look as though the roof is falling in?"

"It's nothing. Really. Nothing." Her need was as transparent as the wind. Her face was a geranium.

But Jan was blind that day. "Look, run along," said Jan. "And let me finish this."

Little Melly fled in tears to Lizzy. "What should I do? He never even noticed my starched collar."

"You're not the kind that makes men blush," said Lizzy, quavering. "Just stay close-by. He'll come around. They all do. Trust me."

She knew her son. She knew he would, for he did nothing to discourage speculation. He only said he needed time. He was a man. He wanted the initiative, concluded Lizzy stoutly. In his good time he'd take it.

She gently stroked the girl's soft hair. "Just give him time. He will not run away."

Why, everybody knew, by then: Jan would not run away.

At the next opportunity, she pulled her son aside. "Jan, I'm your mother. Forgive me for speaking my mind. Has she cast a bad spell on you?"

His eyes slid past her anxious glance. He seemed preoccupied. "What are you saying? Who?"

"Who? You ask who? Why, Abigail. I'm speaking about

Abigail."

He crinkled his blue eyes. "Mom! Abigail?"

A lump rose in her throat. Her temples throbbed with tension. She almost died with shame, confessing such a thought. "I must admit it has occurred to me it could be Abigail."

Jan laughed away her fears. "Don't go by gossip, Mom. She isn't kin. You know that."

Her thoughts became like mercury: in keeping with tradition! "I am so glad to hear that, Jan. I'm so relieved that you and Little Melly—"

"Stop worrying."

Relief rushed warmly to her bosom. "If only you and Little Melly—"

"Don't worry, Mom. It's still too soon. She twitters, and she chirps."

"Who? Abigail?'

"No, Mom. We are discussing Little Melly."

"Does she have braids?" asked Lizzy pointedly.

"Who? Little Melly?"

"Abigail."

She knew he laughed at her and at her silly fears. She didn't laugh, however. Discounting Jan, she knew no one who did.

# Chapter 20

In Russia, as in America, ancestral customs and folkways were vigilantly watched, experiments with worldly siren songs not treated cavalierly. Their leaders saw to that.

One such was Alexander, Peet's oldest son, a man who, far beyond the boundaries of Apanlee, was recognized as the most imposing estate owner of his day.

The Elders spoke no words that Alexander did not second gladly. Namesake to several tsars, he walked, a king, within his furrows and knew without a doubt: "Faith in the Lord. Obedience to the tsars. And loyalty to blood and kin—that is the only mix of mind and heart that will bring happiness."

He told his sons and daughters speaking from a bursting heart: "Tradition is like granite. He who counts stars has given us a covenant. It will be up to us to hold it in esteem."

It was a message clear and true that rang from every pulpit and found a thousand echoes in everybody's heart. With wealth came obligations, and obligations made more wealth. All knew it; chiefly, he, the head of Apanlee. They were one clan, one blood; they sowed and reaped; they sang and prayed; they

counted on the ancient blood of rectitude. Toward the little hunchback, who gently spoke his mind to plead for reason over Faith, their mood was one of benign tolerance.

The spurious child that Alexander's silent sister should have hidden in the woods had grown into a spindly man, still asking that his bed be warmed. The bursting purse of Apanlee kept him in comfort and good standing. Skilled in at least four tongues—Russian, Ukrainian, High German, Low German—he read and read and read.

"Unless you read," ran Uncle Benny's argument, "you cannot be informed. "

Not many farmers did.

Not that they didn't value print. Most everybody kept subscriptions to Uncle Benny's organ, appropriately called the *Voice of Peace*—partly to have sufficient kindling paper for breakfast fires in the morning, partly to keep the little oddling snug and occupied in his exotic world of words, knowing he would never run a blade into the rich and fertile earth.

They were like that; one of their traits was tolerance. In deference to his learned mind, they gladly stepped aside; he had free rein with paper, ink and pen.

His gently chiding editorials are now the stuff of history. They rankled a bit, for they urged the containment of Faith.

On Uncle Benny's throbbing brow sat many a thought that was odd. He saw a saint where a devil might be, and a devil where there was a saint. He sat among them, quietly, a cousin among cousins. His thoughts were far away.

He said to no one in particular: "I wish I did not see so clearly."

Just as the crocuses were breaking, a little girl was born to Uncle Benny and his Dorothy—a child as smooth and perfect as a clover seed, without a single flaw. Her eyes were blue; her hair was fair; but nonetheless, her life was short and sad—much like a Cossack ballad.

Of her, we do not have a single photograph; we only have some moving poems, held fast with shaking pen. We do not even

know her name; however, thanks to those few trembling poems a grieving father wrote, we know that she grew up and married young, then sickened, and then died.

The poem said: you could not force the hand of fate. The difference between life and death was luck.

This young girl was as fleeting and as stirring as the wind that sways the crown of trees. That's what the poem said. They say she lived. They say she died. She mattered only insofar as she, in turn, would give birth to a little baby boy around the time the First Great War broke out.

This youngster's name, the hunchback's only kin, was Jonathan.

Pied pipers come in many guises. Claas Epp was one of them.

Whereas many Russian-German settlers still longingly looked westwards across the stormy waters in search of *Lebensraum*, since land was scarce and getting scarcer by the year and decade, Claas stubbornly looked east across the wastes of Tartary .

His ear was always cocked.

He sat, a throbbing ache upon him like a vise, cupping his face with feverish hands, tilting his head this way and that to catch the fleeting Voice.

"I am with you," the Voice told Claas. "Believe. Obey. Do as I say. Apocalypse is near. The trustworthy walk east."

He listened apprehensively. He prayed repeatedly for guidance and direction, finding only small, disjointed answers. All the while, the Voice spoke up. "Have Faith," the Voice told Claas. "Go east in search of bliss. Go west and face damnation."

"Not me!" Claas cried, recoiling. "I am too weak. I fear too much!"

The Voice was unrelenting. "I am with you. Be not afraid. Faith is your trusty arrow."

One sparkling Sunday morning, Claas told his restive congregation: "The Lord has told me in my dreams: 'Lead ye my flock into the sun. The Beast! The Beast! The Antichrist!'"

The congregation hushed.

Claas took a deep and trembling breath. He pounced upon the gullible.

"Don't let yourselves be fooled. Go east and walk into eternal bliss. Go west and face the Fiend."

A mild, obedient girl fell prey to Claas's flickering eyes. This happened at a harvest festival, in the vicinity of Apanlee, where he assisted her in scooping out the juicy hearts of watermelons to boil to a syrupy brew. Her name was Ella Friesen.

Ella hailed from a poor but pious village to the east of Apanlee. She glanced at Claas and wondered: "Who is this man? What is he telling me?"

"I am a messenger of God," he told her broodingly. "That's all you need to know."

He acted as if struck by lightning, suddenly, and she pulled back in fear. He fell to the ground at her feet and kept hugging the earth in convulsions. When he could speak again, he spoke in foreign tongues.

"On curse of future blindness," cried Ella, an untouched girl and therefore strong with wrath. "Thou, Satan! Leave him be!" The blood rushed to her heart. She knelt in the dust by his side, cradling his temples in both of her hands. She tried to calm his demons.

Claas sat up shakily and stared at Ella as a cat stares at a dish of cream. His small eyes glistened greedily.

"Empty your pockets," he told her. "I have to make sure."

She blushed but obeyed since she knew she had nothing to hide.

He took hold of the hem of her dress and inspected the stitches. He let his thumb run through the seams. He added sternly: "Now your clogs. Take off your clogs, Ella."

She blushed a deeper hue but slipped out of her wooden sandals. She stood before him in bare feet, her toes curled inward fearfully.

"I'll wait for you, outside the gate," he said to her, a nervous and perspiring suitor.

She hesitated briefly. The people at the festival watched the exchange, enthralled. She did his bidding, crimson but demure; when it came to the Antichrist, you heeded the Lord's prophets.

Before the year was out, Claas took his hat and went to Ella's parents to ask for Ella's hand. They ignored several warnings from pitying neighbors, for Ella was caught up in Faith.

After his marriage to Ella, Claas grew a shaggy beard. "To resemble Jesus Christ and thereby fool the Fiend," he told her. He knew precisely how to hoodwink Lucifer.

He gave her several pointers. He told her to tread carefully.

Was that a misbegotten dog that kept on snapping at his heels? Was that an ordinary cat that stole along a rainy roof? Others might think so. Claas was not deceived.

He took a rock and hurled it hard, then hid in a cluster of bushes.

"You're hurting? A hot water bottle, Claas?" cried Ella, at a loss.

He cuffed her in response and gave her a black eye.

The coming years revealed that Claas Epp was a man so violent of temper it often came to blows. His congregation grew.

"Have Faith in me," he told his core of staunch disciples. "We must go east. Not west."

His message was beginning to take hold. A timid gathering it was at first—the gullible, the credulous—but then a throng of fierce believers. Claas praised the Lord with lavish tongues for their belief in him.

"You have my word. Faith will sustain you splendidly, " he promised, not the first to discover the key to all mischief.

On wooden clogs, he went from house to house, his ear muffs flapping in the wind, allowing his conviction to grow roots. He climbed on a barrel and shouted to all: "Hear ye! Hear ye! Apocalypse! Apocalypse! Your Judgment day is coming! Your Judgment day is near!" He cried repeatedly: "Go east and walk into eternal life. Salvation to the east! Damnation in the west! Go

west and face damnation."

The credulous took up the chant. The throng knelt with their faces to the east and prayed for the illuminating light.

Though many years have passed since, the memories of those hushed years before the global hurricane are still so clear it might have happened yesterday.

Years rich in Faith and grain! Magnificent harvests—five in a row! Majestic revivals—Faith fingering the destitute of self, while shivers trickled down their spines.

The cautious people did not fail to notice: both Claas and Uncle Benny, taking turns, were vying with each other for the congregation's ear while plucking the beard of the Lord. An infant knew the Gospel was not open to dispute, but that's exactly what they did, those two—both of them reckless with philosophies, at loggerheads since boyhood days. They quarreled and they clashed. They bickered and they haggled, though both had better things to do than testing the Old Script. At least that's what the cousins claimed, who took a lively interest.

Curiosity brought many relatives from far away to verify the march of ritual and wheat, and to follow the accelerating dispute of reason versus Faith. Some came to help with the threshing, others for festivities—all eager for their updates, all equal to the feud.

The ancient aunts from Chortitza arrived; the ancient uncles from Großliebenthal—they came to break the bread of Apanlee for one last time before the grave closed over them. Some came for a few days and others came and stayed, for weeks and even months, and there was room for all—it was a clan that spread its branches far and wide with smiles and open arms.

To be a member of a family respected even by the tsarist bureaucrats was ample reason for rejoicing. As raindrops joined each other until there was a creek that turned into a river to flow into the boundless ocean, so did tradition, history and etiquette make for that final push: for us, for every one of us, the gates of eternity, swinging!

Meanwhile, if children misbehaved, you boxed their ears; that settled it. If they repented properly, the verdict was for love.

Before the holidays, haste drove activities, but afterwards, when snow lay deep and nights were long, nobody rushed the gossip; darts flew from quilt to quilt.

Spring knocked again. The meadows—young and green beneath a wind-swept sky.

The pole beans—blooming nicely.

Then summer came. Autumn arrived. The cold rains came and did not go away. While weather-bound, you might have time to read what Uncle Benny had to say about the oddities of Claas and what Claas had to say to nullify his rival's favorite proverbs, but when the sun shone warmly, the anxious cripple's frilly editorials became as useless as the ruffles on his shirt.

"Your essays?" said the people. "They fire the spirit but weigh on the heart. What do you really know?"

The spinsters clucked their tongues. Uncle Benny often spoke as though he were a Christian—a doubtful matter still. He prayed on his left knee, claiming the right one gave him pain. He quoted from the Gospel: "For Faith will make a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the leas, of fat things full of marrow—"

He read voraciously. When he started a book, he finished it, too. His rosy fingertips lay on the pulse of history through books and papers that he ordered from Odessa. The archives claim that Uncle Benny knew, though no one knew this yet or would have cared to know, that far away, in Germany, a kaiser with a sweeping mustache, a withered arm and a neurotic soul took over from his choking father who died too soon of a malaise that settled in his throat—the Jewish doctors could not help his suffering. He read with interest, furthermore, that far away, at Mayerling, an Austrian prince committed so-called suicide. Even then, there was talk of intrigues. Even then, there were plots aimed at thrones.

"Hath not the potter power over clay?" asked Uncle Benny softly.

He held the Bible on his brittle knees and added: "Faith walks on feathered soles. It crunches living limbs."

Then came the eerie year to Apanlee. From season to season, the birds forgot nesting. The forest stood hushed, while summer lingered past September, but with a queer and ochre light. A chill came out of nowhere next, and dew turned into ice.

When Uncle Benny's turn arrived to read the Devotions at supper, he read with a faltering voice: "Why doest Thou show me iniquity and causeth me to see trouble?"

"Why doest Thou?" repeated the chorus. "Why, Uncle Benny! Your headaches plague you still? Quick! Turn the page to a comforting psalm."

No one took his words to heart. Their little Uncle Benny, whom every female petted lavishly for sentimental reasons, gave fine and upright counsel, but it was known at Apanlee he was a stubborn gnome.

When he was worrying yet one more modern thought, there was no stopping him. The blood rushed to his face. He could not help himself.

"For plundering and violence are before me. There is strife, and contention arises—"

"A troll is sitting on your chest? Here. Let us run for your peppermint drops."

"The curse," urged Uncle Benny, oblivious to his kinfolk's apathy, "devoureth the earth. The joy of the harp ceaseth. All joy is darkened. The mirth of the land is gone. In the city is left desolation, and the gate is smitten with destruction."

The cousins listened sluggishly. The message was well known. All Satan needed was a spark. The dynamite lay ready to explode.

But see? You asked the Holy Ghost to hover as an antidote. You asked for that, and more: protection for the tsars.

That was the nightly ritual. They sang another trembling hymn, attributing all blessings to the righteous majesty of God. The winds carried it over the rooftops. The children started yawning—time to fall into the feather quilts for yet another night after a satisfying day.

But the cripple just wouldn't let go. He spoke up as if under compulsion: "Look at that sunset, Hein. It looks like clotted blood."

The heir to Apanlee, ten years of age, gave a stray mutt a swift, resounding kick.

"Don't do that!" chided Uncle Benny, his voice a little shrill. "For if you hurt a helpless creature, Hein, then Satan stands behind your chair and smirks."

Did Uncle Benny know? Who is to say with certainty? In legend, he lives on. They say he was exceptional. The brittle papers claim he had the gift of the Third Eye. He read Masonic signs. They say he was too smart for his own good; he read too much; to this day it is claimed he dabbled with the devil while drinking scented tea.

As night fell on the roofs of Apanlee, he was the only one, they say, who sensed that, somewhere, deep within the mountains of Georgia, another child with webbed toes and a malicious mood kept pulling spiders from a hole with beeswax.

That year, the April showers sent Claas Epp to bed where he convulsed amid his chills and visions. When he recovered, he shouted hoarsely that the Antichrist had come to earth, roaming the countryside, to snare the gullible. The Voice had told him so. The year was 1889—a hundred years after Peet Neufeld, the German architect of Apanlee, arrived as a young lad from Prussia to claim the soil of Russia, a hundred years before the Berlin Wall came crashing down, thanks to the wheat this gifted Aryan started seeding and perfecting, which Lizzy took to Kansas.

So much of what we see today is ancient—played on a cosmic canvas.

Few knew it then, and even fewer know today that, all the while, nefarious teeth were gnawing at the throne. The evening turned pale; the clouds sank lower still; the relatives prayed fervently.

They were still rich beyond their wildest dreams. They struggled through another lame devotional.

Not one of them would have believed that terror would come clawing at the window panes of Apanlee. It would be yet another quarter century until, both here and there, the fire walk of the Almighty would begin.

# Chapter 21

The feathers flew all over Apanlee. At stake was the correct interpretation of reason versus Faith.

"Claas Epp, a charlatan," the *Voice of Peace* declared in ever sharper editorials. "Here's quackery in pious dress. Here's cunning and deception."

While Claas stalked through the villages in search of souls in peril, gathering them everywhere, the pensive cripple sat alone, moored to his window seat, deep in his cushions, up to his eyebrows in tormenting thought.

"All of them sheep, with a wolf for a shepherd," the genteel hunchback of Apanlee wrote. Like the tsar's pampered pundits, he treasured his book marks, flipping through notes, searching for eloquent thought.

"Don't let yourselves be fooled," warned little Uncle Benny. "Do you lack wisdom? Pursue it! Do you lack understanding? Go after it! Value wisdom as silver and understanding as gold."

Had he had feebler gifts, he might have argued less. He read the ghoulish message. He knew what lay in wait. The horses in the stalls of Apanlee reared heads and whinnied without reason. The sky glowed orange, red, and crimson; the clouds hung low;

the soil was badly waterlogged, and even Alexander, impatient with the calendar, decided with a heavy heart that seeding had to wait.

Claas proved himself a match: with withering scorn, he published a book of his own. Point by point and page by page, he simplified, for the convenience of the flock, the complicated prophesies of Daniel.

Before too many moons had passed, he stood and scanned his lists. His boots were thick with dust. He found his strength and rectitude in numbers. His converts sang and prayed in unison while listening to Claas who shouted himself hoarse.

The faithful looked at Uncle Benny scornfully: "What does he know, a lonely bookworm, with tell-tale ink stains always on his fingers? He who has never steered a plow?"

Despite his splitting headaches, Claas was, by then, an asked-for speaker in debates. Wherever he delivered direct messages from Heaven, the faithful flocked from the surrounding villages.

"A man of God," the faithful people said. "One of the prophets, verily, forecast by Revelation."

Claas had his message pat. Not rain nor snow could hinder him from spreading the Lord's word. He hurled the Bible's prophesies, like stones from David's slingshot. From homestead to homestead he went, a dogged spokesman for the Lord, firmly guided by his dreams and visions, a dog-eared songbook in his pockets—a safeguard he kept handy for those few moments of raw panic, when his voice would choke with wrath and with the burden of his calling and constrict his throat with bile.

Each day, he took a stick to ward off dogs, as he went door to door. "Christ will return and slay the Antichrist," he promised fervently.

His eyes emitted wisps of smoke. The church bells pealed. The undecided muttered incantations. The faithful chorused fearfully: "Show us the light. Show us the luminous light."

"Read Revelation!" urged Claas Epp.

"Here is convincing evidence," said many searching souls who listened to Claas Epp and knew: "At his disposal, twelve

legions of Angels! The Lord is with him. Here is His prophet. This is His people's Moses. What do God's children have to fear?"

All eyes went to the twisted hunchback, who spoke of reason and restraint before he shrunk into his cushions, while Claas, who spoke of Faith in ringing timbre when not deterred by fits of coughing, won.

The faithful started auctioning off hats, galoshes, sheepskins, dishes. They sold their lanterns, saddles, milk pails, washboards—everything. A caravan was forming east of Apanlee.

"No time to waste," urged Claas. "We don't need much, except God's holy promise."

Ella tied knapsacks and bundles together. She roped bedding, her eyes brimming over with worry. Claas tipped his head in consternation, for she was slow, the children were not dressed as yet for the anticipated taxing road, and time was running out.

He urged her on, impatiently. "Our days are counted on this troubled earth. And though the Lord shall give to Thee the water of affliction, Thine eyes shall see Thy teacher—"

"Yes, you are right, my Lord," wept Ella, brokenly. She had no choice; she followed meekly; she left her life behind; her tailwind, too, was Faith.

Claas grabbed his oldest daughter, Josephine, and hoisted her atop his wagon. "Rise up, Ye women that are at ease," he bellowed angrily.

"Where to?" cried Josephine, who liked to be called Josie.

His glance went like a rake across the youngster's face. "Now, Josephine, your scarf," he told her sternly, watching her with burning eyes. "Shape it. So that the Trinity be pleased."

"Yes, Father," said the child, and bit her lip with mortification, folding the cloth to make a perfect triangle.

Claas watched her, smoldering. He knew right then and there: drop after drop onto a sizzling brick. He knew she must be broken, for she would never bend. He cuffed her with cruel blows. "How you annoy me! Greatly!"

She twisted in the grip of Faith that she saw burning, pin-

point lights, deep in her father's eyes. She was not even ten years old. Faith branded her from infancy. The scar would never heal.

She shrank from the force of his anger. "Whatever do you mean?"

"I know Thy abode, and Thy going out, and Thy coming in, and Thy rage against me—" he chided. "And, therefore," he instructed her, "I put my hook into Thy nose, and my bridle in Thy lips, and I will turn Thee back by the way by which Thou comest, sinner—"

In later years, she would remember always, with that hard lump of ice that would not melt away in any church: she was the only one who struggled hard and long and yet in vain against her father's forceful knuckles.

Many came to see the zealots off.

Claas stalked along the wagons, giving them a last once-over. With trembling lips, he started blessing everything: bolts, screws, a chair, a milking pail, odd household goods. "It's Faith that drives to sacrifice," he told the shivering *Gemeend.*

He looked around triumphantly and saw with satisfaction that Josephine sat, silent and demure, her eyes averted in her lap. His second daughter, Lisabeth, was covered with goose pimples from lingering pneumonia.

The bells tolled mournfully. Thin, misty droplets fell slowly from the sky.

He gave the signal, and the faithful started trekking. This happened on a wet and foggy morning, Claas heading the procession that stretched the length of Apanlee.

They left the cow tied to a tree, the dog still sitting howling on the threshold. Their faces were set east.

By noon, the winds blew hard, pushing the slowly moving caravan. By night, somebody's child was born beneath the wagon covers, a shriveled thing that barely stirred. The waxen mother clung to it with dry and heaving sobs. Claas frowned at her, and she let go. The infant toppled from the wagon. It was the first of many.

That, too, is history. How many of them perished in the weeks and months to come, to this day no one knows.

"A landmark," said Claas Epp, while pointing with his thumb.

On the horizon stood a chain of mountains, very dark and very still. The snow upon them never melted. Cold were Claas' eyes that gazed upon His handiwork. Hard were the words he hurled against the laggards.

He grabbed his ailing daughter by the neck and tried to shake the illness from her body.

"Here, Lisabeth! You're slowing down the caravan!"

"Let go of her," cried Josephine. She lunged at him. He flung her from his side.

"Shave half her head," he ordered, furious. "As punishment."

He knew now that he hated Josephine. What else he said to her, what else she said to him that day, is merely speculation. Of it, she never spoke. She would grow old and brittle, but never touch on that.

Claas was, however, not deceived. She masqueraded as his child; in truth she was The Fiend. He knew she was a child of Lucifer.

He watched her from the corner of his eye. The wisps of smoke intensified. "He writes the script," he said. "You follow. Hear? You daren't disobey!"

She knew that she was done with Faith; he knew it, too. Her lack of Faith caused broken spokes, though he repaired them many times in haste with rusty wire. She drained his energy. She had a way of pouring sand into his thoughts, until he nearly went berserk. At night, her presence kept him up and pacing back and forth, when all his nerve ends shrieked for sleep.

Claas drove the faithful without pity—through oozing dirt, their bedding thick with rain, their sheepskins upturned, cold water sloshing in galoshes. The horses panted hard, in quagmire past their ankles.

He walked ahead, a map with cryptic instructions deep in his water-logged pocket. Rain drops kept pelting on his neck; be-

fore another month was gone, low clouds dispersed a drizzling sleet. The road was long and difficult. The air was cold and clammy.

"Return unto me, for I have redeemed Thee—" he chanted with chattering teeth.

The faithful replied to a voice: "Return unto me. Return unto me."

The axles creaked, and spokes fell out of wobbling wheels.

"The earth mourneth and fadeth away," whispered Claas. "But does it matter, verily? I'll help the princes rule."

His daughter, Josie, walked alongside, ice in her heart, her ankles aching. He paid her little heed. The Voice within spoke clearly.

They trekked for many weeks — through barren deserts and over vast plains where Mongol tribes still grazed their meager cattle, a dogged, chill procession, pulling wagon after wagon over yet another hill. The road hardened. The snow deepened. The wind knifed through the caravan.

Claas wiped fat snowflakes from his eyes. The trek crawled on, across vast stretches, empty land, the horses white with hoar-frost. Their heads were drooping. Their flanks were shivering and heaving. The cold was stiffening their gait.

*"Gospodi pomolui,"* muttered the peasants, watching the chariots proceed. "Lord, have mercy on the fools—"

The peasants cowered fearfully.

"Your daughter, dying," Ella wept. "Why can't we stop, my Lord?"

Ella's breath made small puffs in the air. She slid down from the wagon. She sat down in a snowdrift and started to weep.

"A roof, my Lord," begged Ella. "She's dying. Lisabeth is dying. Why can't you see she's dying?"

He watched Ella with seething impatience. "It seems I can't trust anyone." He wasted not his energy. A foolish thing, a woman: she sat and wailed and shook her head until ordered with reluctance to park in yet another hollow.

"A light so bright it takes the color out of everything," he muttered at terse intervals. Absorbed as he was in the struggle of darkness and light, he could hardly be bothered with death.

He tried to lose his oldest daughter, Josie, in the mountains. Not yet a teenager, she trailed the trek, no longer within reach of prayers, cuffs and blows. At night, the sky was her ceiling, her mattress the iron-hard earth.

She mustered her resilience. She walked where the others had walked. She slept when the others slept.

He woke her with swift kicks. He sent her scurrying to gather charred timber to help her mother heat up sugar water. The animals stood trembling, sucking water from the troughs with greedy, slurping sounds.

"Hurry up!" he urged his daughter, furious. "You! Let's get going. Hurry up!" She ducked as he lurched for her shoulders.

He watched her cannily. She was at fault, he knew. He quivered with spasmodic fear. He sent feverish prayers to heaven. He knew that he must crush her soon, as he would crush a ladybug—just crush it with his heel.

She sat there, hunched, beneath his baleful glance. Across from her hunched Ella, made aged by her Faith.

"My jewel. My jewel," wailed Ella, a desperate woman, just rocking on her heel.

By morning, Ella cried: "No breath, my Lord. No breath!" While Ella doubled up in agony and rocked and Claas fell to his knees to pray, it was the living child who said: "Mama. Your daughter died. Now we must bury her."

She watched her mother rummage, weeping, through some bundles. She watched her wrap the thing that lay there, lifeless, a broken doll with spindly fingers.

Claas lent a hand; he dug the grave; he dug with great ferocity.

"Your sister, an angel already," he scolded. "Those are just clods of earth that strike an empty shell." He gave the lifeless child a firm, impatient shove. It tumbled from the wagon and

slid into the hole.

He stomped on it to pack the dirt. "Kneel down, I say. And pray."

"No prayers left," said Josephine.

"I'll teach you," said her father, "to obey."

"You won't," said Josephine. "You mark my word. You won't. My tongue is mine. You mark my word."

He stroked the button on his coat in a caressing gesture. "I'll squash you like a louse."

"You won't," she said, a small, defiant child. "You will not smite me. Ever."

He took her by the arm and flung her in the bushes. He left a bruise that would not pale for weeks.

He urged them on, for peril darkened the horizon.

He could see it and feel it, eyes open or shut: the Fiend was gaining distance. He knew because, by then, a cold, dissecting light had crept into his brain.

The clouds were gathering again. The fuel sat, ready to explode. The sole thing needed was a spark. He rubbed his aching chest which, any moment now, would spring into a roaring flame.

"A light so bright it sucks the color out of rainbows—" Claas moaned and wiped a furrowed brow.

The air was thin. His thoughts were strangely heady. He snapped his fingers with impatience. He glanced backwards: there was the ominous shadow again.

"Soon!" gasped Claas Epp, but left that thought unfinished.

He looked around: no sight of Josephine.

He fell asleep. He woke to a deep stillness. Up through his nerve ends rolled tides of sweet balm.

"Today is the day," said The Voice.

Out of a quiet that almost seemed a vacuum, The Voice spoke, to the mournful swaying of the trees. Claas listened with cocked head, and tried to fit the pieces. He caught himself saluting smartly. By noon, he knew with blinding clarity: he was the fourth link in the Trinity. He was the Second Son of God.

# Chapter 22

Lizzy often talked of Apanlee as she spent time preparing Little Melly to follow in the footsteps of Jan's forebears. Tying an apron round Little Melly's slender waist, she proudly shared her favorite recipe.

"Here's how we did it, way back home. First, scald three cups of milk. Mix salt and flour. Stir gently. Now add yeast."

"Like so?"

"Like so." No sweeter girl the length and width of Kansas. "Knead smartly on a floured board until the dough feels like a sponge. Keep kneading, honey—keep it up."

"Like so?"

"Yes. Right. See here? Like so. Old Greta used to tell me many times, at Apanlee—"

Soon, Little Melly cooked and baked in Lizzy's cozy kitchen as if it were her own. She ground fat, bursting kernels, ripened to perfection, in Lizzy's brand-new coffee grinder while Lizzy lectured, supervised and lent a hand as needed.

Here was a girl who echoed all her words, who followed all

the rules, a girl who met her betters' expectations, exceptional with needlepoint. She knew the secrets of stuffing goose down pillows so that they wouldn't mildew. She was friends with Caroline as well. Lizzy was so pleased with Little Melly's wifely ways she thought her heart would burst.

"Keep on until small bubbles burst in your hand. And pretty soon, my dear—"

"Like so?"

"Yes. Yes. A little firmer, maybe?"

"A little firmer. Right."

"Add just a table spoon of extra lard. There. Now you have it. See? Like so. Just cover the ball with a cloth. Then let it rise yet one more time. And meanwhile, help me stoke the oven, darling. Remember the first wheat? How bitter it was? And how dark?"

Oh, the pride of snow-white flour, the joy of seeing huge, sweet-smelling loaves cool on clean, starched towels while sending waves of scent into the icy winter air. The rapture—cutting crisp, fat slices from brown loaves!

Lizzy sat in the fierce heart of winter, but safety and comfort were hers, good neighbors were hers, all at her beckon and call. Life was slow, rigid and simple, but even if the snow piled up on Lizzy's window sill and buried Herbert's buggy to the axles, anyone could step into her home at any time of day or night and rest his weary feet.

Lizzy's favorite place was by the parlor window, from where she waved happily to Doctorjay who had, as a precaution against the howling Kansas storm, slung both his muscled legs around the swelling belly of his mare.

"Be sure to stop by for some zwieback," Lizzy called out to him, but the wind snatched the words from her lips.

She knew a friend when she saw one—he was her neighbor and her friend. She was in awe of him; that was mutual. No matter what his weaknesses, she counted on his strength. She watched him plow into the neighborhood, a dogged man, a hardy

man, his belly warmed within, thanks to his hidden flask. He still set bones, pulled teeth and wrapped splints with hot towels, for which he charged a quarter or a dime, depending. He did the Donoghues for free, and that was good enough. She didn't care he was a Lutheran and would remain a Lutheran. She closed her ears to all the gossip that made him out beguiled by Abigail.

What kind of bird was Abigail?

The prairie years had welded Noralee and Lizzy. They traded not just compliments; they traded proven recipes: how apples changed to vinegar, how peaches could be dried three ways. They spent their Sunday afternoons together, feet upon a heated brick, their knitting needles flying, just gossiping away, romanticizing fulsomely.

"Remember how our parents were excited when Nicky first came courting you?"

"Remember how you waylaid Jacob?"

"Of course. Remember Jacob's horse?"

"You never gave up, Noralee."

"Of course not. Would you have?"

"Let youngfolk look forward," sighed Lizzy, knitting pensively.

"By contrast," offered Noralee, and clattered with her needles, reflecting on past triumphs, "we oldsters look more and more back."

By then, she had varicose veins. An ache, an unwanted stranger, sat deep in her bones. She could no longer do her laundry without resting. The Wichita doctors were baffled.

"Do you suppose, maybe, by spring? Jan does seem a bit tardy—"

"I hope so. I certainly hope so."

"And high time, too. Don't you agree? Why, just the other day I heard him say to Doctorjay that it better be sooner—"

"—that it better be sooner than later."

There was a pregnant pause. Then Lizzy squealed: "Could it, by the remotest chance, be Abigail?"

"What? Abigail? You can't be serious."

"Sometimes I have my doubts."

"Small doubts. But still."

"Don't you?"

"Is Jan a slouch, or what?" wailed Noralee, by then ballooning with frustration at yet another male's snail's pace compared to females' inborn second sight when it concerned what nature wanted them to do harmoniously.

Little Melly had a lap for every baby ever born. She had a sure and certain way with butter churns, an eye for cobwebs, an ear for singing harmony. She knew that Monday was washday, Tuesday was ironing day; on Wednesday, she mended and darned. Her hope chest was filling with doilies.

Whenever Little Melly visited with Lizzy, a mother's heart sang like a nightingale. Here was a girl who sidestepped every quarrel—a girl who was near-faultless now and willing to strive for perfection. In fact, so humble, orderly and frugal was Little Melly that, without the slightest hesitation, first thing each merry morning, she carried the clan's chamber pot outside and emptied it over her roses.

Jan took his time, while Little Melly waited. He liked her well enough. Their lives were linked in love. When Little Melly caught the measles and was put in quarantine, Jan walked around for ten days straight as though he'd lost his shadow.

Why, then, such hesitation?

It seemed just yesterday that Little Melly was still small and tracking Jan from field to field with wide, adoring eyes while nimbly winding dandelion chains, not saying much, just watching him. Intently.

Five years had passed by since. She had advanced to gardening, starting with the proper cultivation of a fuming compost heap. She had all sorts of skills. She knew precisely how to tie the haulms of wheat with strong, sharp twine so that they didn't come apart. Her aprons were a tribute to her sewing skills—washed, starched and ironed to perfection.

As June became July, so, too, a girl became a woman. She looked at Jan and stood on tiptoes, practically. She could already hear the diapers snapping in the breeze. Already she could see Jan's baby children building themselves a fleet of little tractors out of her old, discarded spools.

The seasons drove Jan Neufeld. Although he did not say a word to disturb speculation, he never seemed to drop romantic anchor long enough to come to a full stop.

When Lizzy waylaid him expertly and tried to pin him down so she could mark her calendar for the anticipated feast, he laughed, "Hear! Hear!" and tried to sidestep her.

Another Christmas came and went without a wedding date.

By that time, Lizzy couldn't help herself; the words came by themselves: "Don't think me forward, son. But don't you think it's time?" Small patches of wet snow still lingered in the bushes, but where it had melted, you could already see the shining earth. Jan tested the land, pushing the snow away, searching for kernels of grain.

"Whatever do you mean?"

She stood on quaking ground. She decided on frontal attack.

"It isn't Abigail?" she shuddered. "Tell me it isn't Abigail."

"No. It's not Abigail."

"You're sure?"

"Stop fussing about Abigail."

There was no stopping her. She looked upon her son with a profound and all-consuming pride she never knew about herself, but there were parts to Jan's emotions she could not, would not ever understand. Just what did his reluctance mean? Sometimes a mother wondered.

She noticed, for example, that Jan was searching for mirages; he seemed to have that questing bent; he recognized a kindred spirit sometimes even in a Unitarian.

"Jan, when a cow dies on your darling girl," whimpered Lizzy, "she cries as hard as though a relative has died—"

"You're telling me?" said Jan, but would not meet her eyes.

Those were alarming clues. She noticed every one of them, and with a pounding heart. "If only you and Little Melly—"

"Mom, please—"

She does not have a single mole."

"Her blood is cold and thin."

Her hand flew to her lips. She knew her son; she knew his heart beat painfully for causing her this anguish. She thought her own heart might explode—just fly apart with pain. She knew that there were things, romantically, you never touched upon. Yet all the same—like hoar before the snow!

"All that will change once she has given birth to half a dozen babies," she pleaded. She was scarlet of face, yet she knew she must see this through to conclusion. "She doesn't want to put the cart before the horse? Is that it? Jan, if you would only—?"

Jan studied his nails and said nothing.

"How can you judge a meal," cried Lizzy, desperate, "you haven't even tried?"

"Enough."

She reached for him; she almost clung to him, a drowning woman: "What are you saying, Jan? You're young. You are a healthy male. Have you discussed this yet with Doctorjay? If I were you, I wouldn't walk. I'd run."

"Your wedding wouldn't come to grief?" asked Doctorjay as well, and not too subtly, either, in either voice or words. In fact, he near shouted alarm. "Don't back out now! For ages, your wedding has been a foregone conclusion!"

Jan spoke evasively. "What is a year or two?"

"Look at the girl. She'll fit into anyone's pew."

"Do me a favor, Doctorjay." There was a fine edge to Jan's voice. "Let's you and I discuss the weather, shall we? Do you suppose that it will rain?"

"We're talking man to man. Give me one good excuse."

"My reasons are mine. They are private."

The bonesetter grew limp with fear, but then he roused himself; he'd come in a combative mood; he wouldn't leave until he

had an answer that would calm down his wife, whose instincts were as raw as radishes. Therefore, he spoke sharply and thrust his chin forward.

"Why wait? What for? It isn't that you have to wait. You can afford the finest feast. Why not get busy now?"

"I am not in the mood."

"Look. I'm just trying to be helpful. I'm your friend. You can tell me. You can confess to me. Is something wrong somewhere?"

Jan shrugged and kicked a rock: "Not that I know of, Doctorjay."

In his distress, the bonesetter was cuffing Jan, whom he respected greatly. "The perfect choice! You hear? Here. Have a swig. I'd put a dollar up to bet that girl is simon-pure." The healer was enormously alarmed. He did not meddle easily in things romantic and emotional, for that was Noralee's domain, but now he moved into his strongest gear: "Now let's discuss your symptoms."

Jan started laughing softly. "There's nothing to discuss."

"Give me details. I want details. Here. Have a swig." He thrust his bottle forward. "Just take a hefty mouthful. Talk will come by itself."

"No. I'm afraid not, Doctorjay."

With trembling fingers, Doctorjay kept pulling on his mustache all the while. "Not much like her beloved Momma?"

Jan turned as silent as the church before the preacher spoke.

"Here. Have a sip. It's just my stomach bitters. If there is something to confess, you'd better do it now."

"There's nothing to confess, much less in need of bitters."

"Well, then?"

"I don't need blinders, Doctorjay. A horse works best with blinders."

The two of them were sitting in the evening breeze, between them a moist silence. At long last, Jan spoke up. "It's very simple, really. I am not sure you'll understand. I'd like a girl with laughter in her eyes. I hunger for a joyous, reckless spirit."

"Don't give me that. Take it from me. They're all alike. Not one of them is different."

"How would I know?"

"What do you want?" cried Doctorjay and felt like throttling Jan. "Just as I've told you many times—I know that for a fact. I've told you that already. I'll vouch for that! I do! And for the record, Jan, one might take Little Melly for a saint, if you want my opinion. She reads your mother's recipes—"

"She reads my mother's recipes," said Jan and faced the healer squarely, " but can she read the secrets of my soul?"

# Chapter 23

In the early days of pioneering, patience was a way of life—and that's what Jan and Little Melly needed, patience.

Nobody hurried all too much—you did what you could while the Lord wrote the script. You lived and you died, practicing patience always, until the angels came and scooped you up to sit at the edge of His hem.

And in between, you watched the seasons change.

The men took to the fields. The women did the kitchen chores. The young fry buzzed about the meadows. The oldsters let the good sun warm their creaking bones.

Corn grew two feet; the tassels were already forming. The rye was ripening as well. The chickens laid enthusiastically. A calf became a cow.

You knew that each cow knew its gate. You knew that each child kept a curfew. Thursday was quilting bee day. Friday was volunteer day. On Saturdays, the air was saturated with the smell of rich, fried bacon, which was the proper scent to finish off the week.

Sunday was set aside for leisure, prayer and diversion. Di-

version meant getting together with coffee and zwieback—not saying much, just sitting there, quietly, at peace with yourself and the world, content to the tips of your toes, treasuring a sturdy knowledge: that there was joy and certainty in keeping callused hands on plows.

There was rejoicing everywhere as modern machinery came in. Jan's green steam reapers were cutting swaths five feet in width. The wonder and the spectacle of doing things mechanical! Wherever you looked, wherever you turned, breathtaking progress: steely fingers, even teeth that bit into the Kansas earth.

Jan often talked about the future—translated: large-scale farming without animals—a truly shocking thought. He shrugged when preachers voiced their reservations that progress might become affliction if prudent brakes were not applied. He dreamed of travel on wheels without tracks. His mind stretched like a rubber band. His dreams jumped every boundary. He claimed to read the logic of the future—you did not have to argue with machines. They moved without the aid of shouts and whips. They never needed watering. They did the work of fifty men in half the time, and at fantastic savings.

Lizzy, too, was willing to believe whatever Jan believed: that progress was a blessing to behold. But to forsake her loyal livestock altogether? She would have none of that. The future needed brakes. Why would one want to double speed? A horse ran fast enough.

The seasons came and went. The children's voices faded. Large snowflakes floated from the sky. The folks in the Dakotas? Good land and gentle hills—although a Kansas farmer held his own against the best of the Dakotans, anywhere and anytime.

To wit: In Hillsboro, three brand new windmills bearing solid German names. A German restaurant. A street named after ancestors. Another store where you could shop and gossip the old-fashioned way—Low German, naturally—while checking every bargain.

"Next year," Jan told his mother, "I'll build us a more spacious home. A home with red brick tiles."

"How many chimneys, Jan?" Hope rose and fell, much like a breezy curtain.

"Three chimneys. Maybe four?"

That was the best news yet! Both Lizzy and Noralee waddled through clouds. Why would Jan want a larger house, unless he was thinking of children?

"Eat more, honey. Eat! Eat!" urged Lizzy, while stuffing Little Melly as though she were a goose. Let nature have its way! That was her own philosophy. Watching children settle into marriage was much like standing by the window and watching clouds come down in sheets to bring renewal to a parched and dusty earth.

Lizzy started pinching here and saving there; she had enormous aspirations; the stack of cash in her fat cheese account just grew and grew and grew. She'd use it to purchase a full set of dishes to give Little Melly a proper head start.

"Blue rim or red?" she asked.

"I am still undecided. I can't make up my mind."

"Just take your pick. The difference, not even worth quoting. Though next week is a special sale we can't afford to miss—" By this time Lizzy was the matriarch of the foremost family in Mennotown, with honors galore and riches to spare. But when it came to extras from the wishbook catalog, she still relied on discounts.

Yet, even so! A joy to buy what needed to be bought and still have pennies left to spare!

Since Jan kept teasing her about her strict frugality, Lizzy bought herself a brand new coat and gave the old to Abigail. She splurged on thread and gingham. She braved the elders' wrath, since vanity was sin, and after fussing for a week, she went so far as to buy her prairie daughters each a set of Eaton's mittens.

She was in full agreement: the proven way to bounty and abundance was straight and clean and simple: spend just a little less than what you earned—your pennies piling up for you as

just reward for good, hard work—and presto! It was absolutely guaranteed: you would come out ahead.

When Lizzy spoke her fears that progress might move faster than was good for Mennotown, Jan laughed and told her not to worry.

"Wheat will double soon in quantity and price," said Jan, and bought a plow with double shares. He bought that plow on time, since he was rich in property but sometimes short on cash. "Progress can never hurt a farmer."

Lizzy did her best to keep her fears and worries to herself, but could not help herself. "It pays to be cautious," she fussed.

"We'll pay it off next year."

"I just don't like to sleep on debt." She knew no one who did.

"Mom, please stop worrying."

Lizzy had a point that made her fuss and fret. His new plow came with a price tag of the kind that made the richest neighbor stop right in the middle of his sentence and lose his train of thought. She didn't know what made her fret—she knew that Jan was right. She quenched her strong misgivings. Jan was so rich, by then, she could whiten his coffee on weekdays. She trusted her son and his judgment; she trusted her husband as well. Both said they had to modernize—and fast!—or else they'd fall behind their more progressive neighbors, the ultimate disgrace.

The world market took a bad turn with low prices for the wheat, but Jan, his instincts on alert, had switched to barley crops before the bad news hit. That year, Jan was decidedly one of the luckiest farmers.

Jan went and bought a grass green cyclone stacker on credit from a bank in downtown Wichita. He signed a pile of papers.

When a large parcel of prime land located north of town went up for sale, Jan bought it for himself. Again he signed, though Lizzy gloomed and doomed. Doing farm business on credit was a frightening risk. The Bible talked about the usurers. Debt stood

for the mark of the Beast.

But Jan just smiled and patted Lizzy's hand. "The future beckons, Mom."

When a harness store went out of business in the east, low-traffic end of town, Jan bought that store as well. He bought it for a modest sum; he said he planned to renovate. Again, he used his credit.

He knew a bargain when he saw one. Before the ink was dry, he found another one. He found them everywhere. He signed repeatedly.

Jan bought more plots of land, rich in peat and nutrients. He seeded two to barley and oats and plowed the rest to potatoes. A lucky buy, he claimed. You pushed up the sod; there lay the potatoes—a good three bushels to a square.

For buy he must, he said. Or fall behind forever—play second fiddle to the Friesens and the Harders, who had already bought two glossy Deere tractors on credit from their bank. The money came cheap, and the bankers slapped Jan on both shoulders.

To stem the tide of purchases on time, Lizzy sold six of her finest cows, with Doctorjays's advice and Herbert's help, and let Jan use the slaughter money to pay off what he owed.

Jan's next ambitious project was a mill. The wedding, he explained to Lizzy, had to wait.

For days, he pored over blueprints; her sewing patterns had to yield.

When the mill was finished, the *Wichita Eagle* gave Jan three front page columns full of praise. Lizzy passed around the paper clipping for others to admire.

"Real Progress Comes at Last to Mennotown," the headlines shouted, and there was Jan, sun-bronzed, magnificent, next to the grain that poured from hollow tubes.

Jan filled up his notebook with numbers. The day came when he said: "Why not keep our money at its origin where it will do most good?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"I have the land," Jan said. "I'll simply build a bank. There is a possibility of partnership. I met some fellows down in Wichita. They offered to put up the cash. I am to give collateral."

Which was as good an argument as any. Some years before, Jan had bought that special corner parcel, next to his parents' property, and set it carefully aside. Now Lizzy saw the purchase came in handy.

While Mennotown slept peacefully, a Hebrew barrister filed paper after paper. Jan's bank was the sensation of the day.

He called it the Mennotown Landesbank. He covered himself with additional glory by opting for burnt brick. The blacksmith shop, the brand new city hall were brick; Jan said he could not fall behind; sod wouldn't do; he must have brick as well.

The deed came with a huge official seal and was composed of fifteen paragraphs in print so small nobody could decipher it, not even in the glaring August sunshine that baked the state of Kansas.

"Mom, safekeep this for me," said Jan, and gave her a brief pat.

She kept it in her sewing box, below her thread and buttons. She even wound a rubber band around to make sure the pages stayed together.

By then, Lizzy was frantic with worry. If progress grew unchecked, the elders thundered from the pulpit, the world would be in trouble—for human beings, being human beings, replete with all delusions, might next decide to ape the birds, attempting to sail through the air!

After a string of fantastic crop years, Jan saw to it that all of Main Street, end to end, was paved with cobblestones, including the church parking lot. Unsparing with the riches he amassed, Jan let the townsfolk benefit; one good deed made room for another.

It was a breeze, thereafter, to sweep up the after-church horse apples the deacons fussed about. Noralee drew triumphant con-

clusions: "Disarming the preachers, no doubt?"

Jan laughed. "Matchmaking still?"

"Just on my toes. That's all."

"You are an ingrained schemer."

"I'm counting firmly on the ancient laws of love." She surveyed him with female eyes and came away assured. She had his word. It was decidedly not Abigail. No, not for love or money could it be Abigail!

But on the other hand, she was no fool; she drew on past experience in similar predicaments. She kept both eyes wide open. Jan was a man already, shouldering a man's responsibilities. But Little Melly? Still busy filling out her hips.

Jan fixed a steady gaze on her. "Aunt Noralee, what is the rush?"

"You ask what's the rush? How can you say that, Jan?"

"No. You tell me."

"Look at your poor old mother. Her lower lip is quivering."

Indeed it was. And with good cause. The neighbors, all Lizzy's age or younger, had offspring as fluffy as puppies. One son-in-law farmed north in the Dakotas, another farmed in Mountain Lake, a third had moved to Winnipeg where land was rich and cheap, and all their cradles were astir. A neighbor to the right had two. Another, to the left, had four. The one across the street had five already; he might have had seven, had not one died from accidental poisoning, another from the evil germ.

What did she, Lizzy, have to show? An aging bachelor.

Jan was a son of Apanlee, the link that bound her still to Nicky. She often thought of Nicky. It was as if he stood beside her, his questing gaze on her.

Where is the future, Lizzy? Where are the children, Lizzy?

I don't know, Lizzy wailed. I'm at a total loss.

When prodded, Little Melly said, her eyes demurely in her lap: "Jan's wishes? Like wolves in a forest."

Not even a fourth cup of coffee brought the matter any closer to the fore. Little Melly sat there, shadow-stitching, all slender

and still and serene. Her breathing was shallow but even.

"Say what you will, it isn't Abigail," said Lizzy forcefully. "I know that for a fact."

"It couldn't possibly be Abigail," said Noralee as well, thus bringing up the rear. "Why, criminy! The very thought! Not Abigail! Why! Abigail?"

"I know. It isn't Abigail."

"Just never mind that hussy."

Both mothers, flanking Little Melly left and right, shed vexing tears into blue-rimmed coffee cups they had recently bought from the wish book.

"You're still a little on the skinny side," decided Lizzy finally.

And Noralee: "You're thin as a rake, Little Melly!"

That must be it. She must be fattened up. They held sage counsel with each other and decided: "He'll want her plump. And of a rosy hue."

"Eat more," urged Noralee. "So something will stick to your ribs."

"More sour cream," urged Lizzy who knew there existed no ailment that Caroline's milk couldn't cure. A bigger slab of mashed potatoes! More dimples, Little Melly!

Lizzy opened her book of devotions: let Abigail remain determined in her folly. She had Jan's word. It wasn't Abigail. Could be that Abigail might fancy Jan a bit—but then, who didn't fancy Jan? So let her fancy him. So let her shower him with arrows of temptation. She might as well be wishing for the moon.

Was there a single maiden in the entire state of Kansas who didn't fancy Jan? Down to the Texas Panhandle and up to both of the Dakotas!

The lazy Donoghues? snarled Noralee as well.

She, too, derived all her opinions from her neighborhood. There was no need to go to Wichita to check a rumor out. Nobody she knew touched the Donoghues. Not even with a ten-foot pole.

She knew enough about the Donoghues to have grave doubts about their course. She questioned their sincerity. She trusted them so far as that was possible. It was clear they were heading for trouble. They still put too much pepper on their food. They weren't equal to the glories of a harvest.

To be anomalous in any way was an offense in matters large or small and, therefore, gossip leaped from lip to lip about the Donoghues. These rumors had it, stubbornly, no matter what the counter-evidence, that Abigail was laying tantalizing traps.

"If that is true, I wish her well," said Little Melly tranquilly, a master of diplomacy. "Who are these people, after all, but drifters out of nowhere?" You snubbed them mildly for their views, but otherwise you let them be. Such was the recommended strategy, though every relative leaned forward in hopes of learning more.

No beads of terror sat on Little Melly's brow. If Abigail entered by one door, Little Melly, soft as a kitten and just as genteel, rose quietly and left by the other.

For her docility, Little Melly won many praising nods. She sat and knit and smiled. The bounds of restraint didn't snap. She loved Jan well enough and said so openly, though girls, not just from Mennotown but all the way to Hillsboro, swarmed over Jan like bees.

Lizzy was scrubbing her buckets to a befitting weekend sheen when Jan sat down on the steps by her side. He told her carefully:

"Mom. Listen hard. I know that this will hurt. But I don't think that I can marry Little Melly. I'm very fond of her. But I don't think I love her."

She would have none of that. "Jan, she loves you. She's loved you since the cradle."

"I know. That makes it hard."

"She's never loved anyone else. You know that. How can you resist such devotion?"

He broke the painful silence. "She's bland as gruel without salt."

"It's only natural," stammered Lizzy, "for a girl to shrink from temptation."

He spoke calmly. "That's not what I'm talking about."

Oh, but it was. Was she born yesterday? She knew him like her shadow. He coveted the earth of Kansas—it seemed he couldn't have his fill. Would he not covet equally the body of a woman?

"Mom, listen—"

She pressed her palms to both her ears. Why talk about the things that nature took for granted? She shook her head, near tears. She spoke into her lap.

"The wedding night," she stammered, scarlet, "will put to rest all doubts." She struggled with the images she knew. He was a man with the desires of a man. She knew he was. He planted trees to break the barrenness of prairie—why not plant children, too? He widened granaries and piggeries and cow barns—why not as well widen a woman's hips to let the future grow? She knew that every tool and every wheel, every plow and yoke and harness stood ready for the coming seeding. So stood Jan's girl, just waiting for his touch.

"The wedding night," said Jan, "is the beginning, Mom. It's not the end. My world is live and lush. Her world is quiet and black."

Time and again, Jan Neufeld postponed plans for his wedding. His excuse was a lame one: his harvests came first.

But in the end, proximity won out. It was a source of boundless joy to their respective families that Jan and Little Melly, after all, announced right after services one merry Sunday morning, that they would tie the knot.

Jan seemed at peace if somewhat somber, while Little Melly walked around, transparent in her dignity. The neighborhood was pleased: these two, the pride of Mennotown, behaved decidedly within the covenant that centuries had wrought.

You could tell by the words in their songs. And how they liked to sing! Jan had a pleasant baritone, and Little Melly harmonized; she hummed; she had a small but lovely voice, and here is what she sang:

*"You need not be*
*At all afraid,*
*Indeed I love you*
*Dearly."*

Her gaze was fastened on his face. She sang just like a nightingale and—come to think of it!—all nightingales, that year, that brief and wondrous year, sang only for a happy bride-to-be whose name was Little Melly.

*"The sooner boys and girls will court,"* she sang,
*"the sooner they will marry."*

Soon, other youngfolk joined in, all practicing their tunes to make a perfect choir. Out came the fiddle and guitar:

*"The higher up*
*The cherry tree,*
*The riper grows*
*The cherry—"*

They sang until they were emptied of songs. They gave over their songs to the night. It was custom to sleep where you fell—the boys in the hay, the girls on the floor in the parlor.

"At last! At last!" shrieked Noralee.

Had she not been rotund, by then—and had not dancing been a sin!—she would have surely danced. She would have surely waltzed through clouds, had she not suffered, more and more, from gout and rheumatism, two ailments that came early.

A boulder rolled from Lizzy's heart as well: the wedding date was firm. She and her sister parlayed possibilities with hushed, excited voices. The egg account, the cheese account were bulging.

Herb spread a glossy coat of paint to spruce up the verandah for the anticipated feast. Lizzy planted white and red geraniums for contrast; they kept cascading over the railing.

"The only task still left to do," said Lizzy, glowingly, "is to throw caution to the wind and order toweling."

That's how it was—within an inch. Within a tiny inch. The town was filling up already with relatives and guests when news came, on a drizzly day, tucked deep into the mail pouch that Doctorjay brought back from Wichita. It was a skinny letter, limp from its voyage out of Russia. It had traveled by land and by water.

It told of Faith gone bad.

And what that letter said, in small script at the bottom part in Uncle Benny's shaky hand, was this: that a small caravan of pious folks from the vicinity of Apanlee—misled, deceived, and decimated beyond words, with no strength left to bury anyone—had wrestled what was left of Faith out of a madman's clutches and now were Kansas-bound.

And nothing would ever again be the same.

# Chapter 24

Lizzy's kitchen and parlor were packed—visitors, elbow to elbow!

Whatever had legs had assembled to hear the news first-hand and inspect the bedraggled survivors. Heads swiveling like weather vanes, the neighbors stared with fascination at the few who, tested sorely in their Faith, had come out in the end triumphantly.

Although much time had passed since they themselves had left the safety of the steppe to tame this foreign soil—Russia never more to see, exchanged for a wider horizon—that evening they were all back in thought at Apanlee.

"And Uncle Benny? How fares he? Still thin and frail? No match for Claas's choleric temper?"

Who didn't remember the cripple who sat atop three books so as to reach his food? More yet, had anyone forgotten Claas and the tormenting headaches that plagued him from his childhood, and even made him wrestle demons?

A foolish and misguided man, who even climbed a table, ex-

pecting levitation, which, sadly, never came! What vanity! Apostasy! No wonder many perished.

But look at those who survived the mud-spattered, treacherous road! The men kept refilling their pipes and littered the floor with sunflower seeds. The women inspected the children, then scurried for blankets and pillows.

These wracked survivors were the stuff of which church history was made—in numbers now no more than filled a kitchen, whereas hundreds had set out! They had made it safely over mountain chains, sailed clear across the ocean, and now, at last, bore witness to the power of their prayers against Claas' mad, rambling mind: a cuckoo, tumult in his head since the day that he was born! Oh, the folly of misguided Faith!

Doctorjay was in his element. On the sly, he kept patting the flask he had concealed in his ballooning trousers, next to a jar of stomach bitters he kept as antidote. "You all! You might have been wasted! You might have perished from hunger, exposure, or both! He told you that the Rapture was near? Here! Try my elixir!"

Little Melly, that night, was a ministering angel. She was rocking the orphan; she wouldn't let go.

"Now eat and drink! Just eat and drink until your belly hurts, you little darling, you!"

The child could find no words. Her eyes were glass on glass.

"Couldst thou have made it through the wastes of Tartary," chimed Little Melly eagerly, "had He not shone His light on Thee? Had He not lent a helping hand?"

She had eagerly helped Lizzy to put out her finest dishes and to load her table to the edge: eggs, sour cream and bits of tasty cheese, cured pork, fat home-made sausages, preserved apples and peaches, the works.

"Eat now," chirped Little Melly. "Eat all you want. And then admit: as good a slice of bread as any!"

She had been only six years old when she set out for foreign shores—but she, too, still remembered Apanlee, held by a thousand memories. "How are the folks at Apanlee? Can they match

our grain? Here. Sample this warm soup, dear child. Have yet another slice of this fine cherry pie. You say your sister died? My. My. How sad. And you helped bury her?"

Jan spoke in warning undertones. "Now, Little Melly. Easy."

"Poor child! Poor child," chimed Little Melly, undeterred. "Your Papa mad. Your Mama in a shallow grave. Your prayers saved you! Did they not? Do witness now, dear child."

"She's tired," said Jan sharply. "Now leave her be. You hear?"

But Little Melly wouldn't hear—she, in her element. She hugged the orphan to herself, her own eyes brimming over. Nothing good enough for these exhausted wayfarers! For an entire month, they had not changed their clothing. Here was water! Here was soap! Here was the ironing board!

"For months and months you trekked? Through ice and snow, you say? No doubt with many prayers?"

She tasted salty tears of pity on her tongue. She added, softly rocking back and forth: "But it was prayers, was it not? How else could you have made it? Just nod, dear child. Just nod."

The girl had clearly lost her tongue. She opened her mouth and closed it again, but not a sound came forth.

"Do witness now. As best you can. We'll fill in the details."

Lizzy, too, held a huge loaf of home-baked bread clutched firmly to her bosom and kept on cutting off fat slices. "Here. Try this, darling child. Do witness, honey. Try. Now is the time to witness."

"That's right. That is exactly right," said Noralee, not one to be left out. "Give credit to the Lord. What was your name again?"

The girl spoke hoarsely: "Josephine."

"Did you not say your name was Josie?"

"I have two names."

"Whyever two? Whatever for?"

The stranger spoke up then. "I use them alternately, befitting the occasion."

"What?"

"It's Josie when I'm happy. When I am sad, it's Josephine."

Noralee dropped both her teaspoon and her jaw. Lizzy cast

her glance into her lap, suppressing a small smile. Doctorjay gave out a hearty guffaw. Jan chuckled softly to himself: a nicknamed child, right out of Claas Epp's household?

He took the youngster's hand. "Indulge yourself," he told her soothingly.

Little Melly gently brushed the crumbs from her white shirt. "It's best to settle on one name. It's either Josephine or Josie. Make up your mind. No need to get confused."

"No, Little Melly. Listen—"

"God must be very pleased with you to have spared you when everybody else was left to perish by the road," said Little Melly, her eyes not on the child but on Jan's forehead now. Her voice was velvety.

"God hates me," said the girl with matted hair, regaining her own voice.

"Now, listen, Josephine. Please. Pay attention carefully. God does not hate you, darling. You're special in His eyes. Why else did you survive? In turn, He'll want obedience."

It was as though the young girl ducked a flying object. She shuddered once and closed her eyes. Jan still held her right hand. Now he reached for the other. He spoke in a low voice: "One name or two? What is the difference, really?"

But Little Melly was relentless. "You know that. Don't you, Josephine? That you are special in His eyes? That you now owe the Lord?"

The child took a deep, trembling breath against a wall of anguish. The words came by themselves. "He hates me. That I know."

To put six tiny words to a colossal rage helped instantly. It helped enormously. She said the words again. "He hates me. That I know." She was a little female, with all her instincts raw. Her heart was racing like a hunted beast's, yet all the while, deep inside, shone a light.

That light intensified. That light had warmth.

Into that warmth leaned Jan—young, eager, handsome. Male. "You have two names? Well, and why not? You have two pretty

eyes."

The child bit her lip and said nothing. Both hands lay, trembling, in Jan's callused palms. He told her, speaking gently: "You also have a wounded heart. Nobody argues that."

A tremor ran through every limb. "I'm different. I am strong."

Jan said: "I know. I saw that instantly."

Dumbstruck, the folks of Mennotown stared at the brash intruder. Little Melly spoke for them all, her voice a little shrill. "Don't say that, child. That's blasphemy. It wasn't you. It was the Lord. Give credit to the Lord. Your prayers to Him saved you, darling."

"I sent a hundred prayers heavenward," said Josephine, the kind that would go to the scaffold. "And all of them came back."

The wicked tongues, in later years, insisted that it happened then and there. The madman's child dropped all disguise. Could walls but testify! From coffee cup to coffee cup, the common thought was: treason!

Arch-deviltry afoot!

That night destroyed the pleasant fabric of Little Melly's world. It laid a good girl's life to ashes. In the end, the bonesetter cleared thick emotion from his throat. "Tell me. What happened to your arm? Here. Let me take a peek—"

"No! Don't touch me!" All talk hushed instantly before the fear and violence that sprang from her pale face.

"All right! All right! I was just trying to be helpful," stammered Doctorjay. "I won't hurt you. No need to be afraid. I'm just a crusty Lutheran. I doctor in the neighborhood. Here. Easy now. Just let me take a peek—"

"Put first things first," said Dewey Epp, the preacher boy, who watched all this in silence, then hitched up his suspenders before he launched himself.

"God sees the truth. All glory be to Him. I have glad news. If you need cleansing—and you do!—you can be cleansed. And thoroughly. Cleansed right in the blood of our Savior."

"That," said the child, "is nasty language. Verily."

The gasp was uniform. All eyes were widening and staring at the rebel. The shock reverberated in the room, while Little Melly cried, alarmed:

"You mean to tell us you want nothing to do with our Savior?"

"That's what I'm saying. Yes."

"Why not?"

"I just don't see the use."

"Well, then, it's your duty to learn. You and I will have coffee together, first thing in the morning, and practice."

"Look here. Look here," said Jan as though he calmed a trembling foal. "When you are sad or hurt or angry, I'll call you Josephine. When you are happy once again, I'll call you Josie. Right? Is that a deal? Here is my hand. Will you shake hands with me?"

The girl asked, with a cold, chill voice: "Is there a mirror somewhere in the house?"

As if a shot had sounded—without a rifle seen! Indeed, an unseen cannon might have roared.

Little Melly was the first to find her voice again. She swallowed hard. "A mirror? Did you say mirror, child?"

"I'd like to see a mirror."

"I do not own a mirror," said Little Melly sharply. "I don't know anyone who does."

"She's not herself," begged Lizzy wretchedly. "She's plain beside herself with loss of family and friends. Give her a good night's rest. Why don't you tuck her in? A good night's rest will fix her."

"We folks in Mennotown," said Dewey evenly, "do not create ourselves in our own image. See? That would be vanity. And vanity is sin." He drummed now with his knuckles. "Your grasp of our scriptural teachings is frail."

"I have an extra Bible," cried Little Melly, shrilly. "Tomorrow morning—early!—I'll dust it off for her. Her papa mad. Her mama in an unmarked grave. No wonder she's delirious—" She stopped before Jan's glance. It pierced through her, alike to rays that pass through sheets of glass.

So. There it was. Out in the open. Blatant. Nor did it ever go away. It was soon clear to all that Josephine would bring calamity. It was open season on Josie.

When Lizzy said, that night, to break the tension: "Let us now rise and bow our heads—" and Josephine stayed seated, and therefore Jan did, too, nobody said a word.

To preach in coming years the Gospel's healing properties to Josie would be like writing on a hot stove with a candle. The only outcome was more sizzle. Dewey's efforts were in vain; in vain were Little Melly's earnest prayers, proffered up with dimpled hands on Josephine's behalf.

Said Josephine: "I take what suits my fancy. The rest I leave alone."

Those were her very words. They marked her for decades to come. She no more was willing to disguise her nature than she could have changed the color of her eyes.

Those eyes! With flecks in them—like freckles.

Headlong, Jan plunged right into them as though he dived into a gorge. He hung on every word the rebel spoke as though he quaffed the chill, sweet waters of a well.

"I saved myself," she said that night, and many times to come. "By my own strength. I want that understood." She drew a shawl around her shoulders, tightly, and sat there. By herself. The goal she set before herself was freedom. Unwilling she would be, for many years to come, to seek or take advice. She turned her back on Mennotown. She chose the contrary path, and did it with wide-open eyes.

Jan, too. He drew the battle lines as straight as with a ruler.

Some night that was, that hitched such hitherto unseen defiance. Noralee cherished showers of goose bumps; Little Melly kept on gasping audibly; Lizzy could not cease plucking at herself, straightening and straightening her hem. Doctorjay thrust out his chin and growled: "Leave her alone. She's feverish."

She wasn't feverish. She had made up her mind.

Her ragged clothes, all stripped away, were put outside to burn. Her left arm in a sling, she sat, a naked sparrow child, wrapped head to toe in one of Jan's old shirts, that smelled a bit of mothballs. The long sleeves had been folded back; her right hand rested in her lap, her left hand lay in Jan's.

Jan said: "I'll help you. Count on me."

She looked at him with trust and gratitude.

"Whatever I can do, I'll do." Jan sounded as though he were pleading.

She asked in a voice as clipped as a Saturday mustache, while Little Melly's heart stood still: "What will you call me, Jan?"

"I'll call you anything you like. You can be anyone you choose." He added as though at the end of a long conversation: "My little love. Look up at me. Have you no confidence in me? Try to have confidence in me. I want you to have confidence in me."

Their glances locked. The silence that enveloped them was absolute. And in that utter silence that stood between those two, an exclamation point, died Little Melly's hope that she would share Jan's life.

Not that the folks of Mennotown stood idle. Not that they would endure the outrage without a struggle first. The neighborhood stood unified. They marshaled their hymns and their prayers, for kinship was kinship and kinship came first. Beseeching the Lord, they begged for the luminous light. They sang, as they had sung for centuries:

*"—Von der Eh—he..herde reiß mich loß—"*

*Mache mei-hei-heinen Glauben groß—"*

It was a noble hymn. It had a forceful tune. It made for an unbroken thread.

*"Gib mir ei-hei-heinen treuen Sinn..."*

*Nimm mich ga-ha-hanz, mein Jesus, hin—"*

The road was clear. The war was on. The rebel did not sing! To spurn a hymn, to say no prayers, was spiritual anemia. It was like having a deficiency disease.

The demon started writhing deep within. A rage, the likes they'd never seen, propelled the rebel forward.

She started screaming, piercingly. "A mirror—a mirror—a mirror!"

She screamed so loudly, gave such shrieks, that for days afterwards she could not find her voice. She shook off Faith. All saw her fling her hymnal right into the fire as if it were a serpent instead of the collection of the finest songs that any church could claim its own—songs that had lived through centuries!

"I said I want a mirror!"

The cross-stitched, nail-pierced hands of Jesus plunged from the wall and clattered to the floor. The windows quivered on their hinges. The dog slunk into darkness, his tail between his legs. "A mirror—a mirror—a mirror!" Utter bedlam reigned in Lizzy's kitchen as they wrestled the child to the floor. Even Doctorjay forsook all caution and disguise, and poured the contents of his hidden flask straight up into her nose.

After she had spent her rage, when her convulsions receded, Jan lifted her and cradled her. She clung to him with her left arm, her broken shoulder heaving.

Jan's open gaze sought Little Melly's eyes. It was as if two sentries crossed their swords.

# Chapter 25

"I have no use for superstition," the rebel said in later years. "Faith grows on sluggish minds." She said it sweetly, and she smiled, but no one was deceived.

Defiance ran throughout her nature, a shiny blade of silver. In her burned a bellicose fire the Scriptures only fanned.

Little Melly, by contrast, kept cradling her Faith, though being jilted was the worst, next to the agony of Jesus. Her cousins marveled how she held her little chin high in the air, with vintage saintliness.

"It's not been easy," muttered Little Melly, but added that, for her, reward enough lay in her Faith, the merits of which Josie yet would learn.

Little Melly believed in her Savior and felt sorry for those who did not. Had such a thing been possible, she might have taken out a patent on her Faith.

She stuck close to her young preacher brother. She wrung from Dewey several promises that he would never give up trying to bring the errant stranger back into the fold, not even if it took

a trip on camel back to Transylvania. But Dewey needed little urging; the grooves to rein in sinners had been cleaved long before Josie came to Mennotown.

"Their kind of love is not my kind of love," said Little Melly haughtily, when she saw Jan and Josie grow enamored with each other as soon as the defiant child grew old enough to put both arms around Jan's neck without the need to stand on tiptoes.

Roughshod across tradition, that was her routine way. To shock her with the threat of family rebuff was hopeless.

For one, she hated visiting her relatives. She did not need the company of people. By choice, she sat alone, ate alone, napped alone, did absolutely everything alone. She could spend an entire Sunday afternoon alone, deep in another book, her fingers in her ears.

All that was almost more than any preacher worth his homilies could bear. Dewey knew he had his work cut out; he was resolved to do what needed to be done, which wasn't always easy. As soon as Josie spied the eager preacher ambling down the twisting trail, the Book of Devotions pinned beneath his arm, she made a dash for safety. If Dewey waylaid her adroitly, she smiled at him in such a way that both his ears grew hot.

He never lost his goal from sight, though that was difficult; once she even tripped him with a broom, for his right eye was swollen shut; a bee had stung him accidentally as he tried sneaking up on Abigail and one of her admirers.

That did not deter Dewey. Whenever he spotted poor Josie, engaged in quiet discourse with herself, he hooked both thumbs into his belt and stood before her, scowling.

"I promise you eternal life," coaxed Dewey. "Scoot over, Josie. Do. I want to talk to you."

"I'd sell you heaven, too, if I could pick your pockets."

But Dewey was not easily deterred. He knew that Josie came from a respected home; the rest was just tenacity and time. Consensus stood behind him like a torch.

"I said scoot over. Didn't I?"

But Josie didn't move. She just turned her back to the wind.

No matter what he said, how vividly he painted all the flames of hell, she tied her neck scarf sideways.

He patted the back of her head. He did that whenever he could. She flinched and moved away. She was her father's daughter. Embedded deep in her quarrelsome core there lay a savagely mistreated youth.

The ultimate insult was this: she would not volunteer for Dewey. She angrily refused to take the nickel can that Dewey handed her.

"I take what suits my nature; the rest I leave alone," said Josephine. She jumped across her radishes and ran.

"Well. Now that you are one of us," said Doctorjay as well, "you might as well adjust."

He was a pragmatist. He was a raw philosopher, and she found that appealing. As she grew up, and into striking womanhood, she liked him well enough.

He loved to amplify the battle-cry of any underdog. He offered his advice. "You can't sweep back an ocean, Josie. I learned that long ago."

A brief smile lit her face. "You did?"

"I did. I did. Have you not noticed, girlie? You haven't watched me hide my whisky flask so I'd not offend?"

"Well, you're a man. For me, it isn't quite as easy."

He scratched his head. "I'm not a learned professor. But I was born with certain wisdom, see? This is a fine community. These people all mean well. The business of grain takes the blessing of God. That is essential fare. That's why the preachers set up tents. If whistling gives you pleasure, go whistle outside Mennotown."

He saved for her the heels of sausages so she could feed stray dogs. She dreamed up airtight alibis for him. Between the two a robust friendship flourished from the start.

Lizzy, Noralee and Little Melly took stock of the developing

discord between the slight intruder and the robust community and thought up clever remedies. The task at hand was this: just how to plumb the bottom of what ailed Josie so. That Josie was deeply stricken was clear.

"The root of her rancor lies deep," said the wise. Since she came to Mennotown—name tag dangling from her neck—advice and warnings had rained on her from every side. Not that it made a difference. After a long, painstaking siege, Lizzy lured her temporarily into the Wednesday Quilting Bee, where Josie threw down her needle and started yawning at the walls.

But Lizzy had her antidotes, and so did Little Melly, as did Noralee. Three women, meaning well, kept bolstering the hostile girl with many timely prayers and plenty of advice.

They knew that Josie needed time. Josie needed understanding. Josie needed love. Dewey deftly rounded out the picture: Josie had a desperate need to clear up her rankling business with the Lord.

How else, asked Dewey pointedly, could she partake of life in Mennotown, where everybody strove with all his might to be His faithful servant?

"We hope and pray," said Dewey Epp, responding to the well-known mandate, "that Josie will yet see the light."

"Yes. So we hope and pray."

"Our good Lord is her match."

"Yes. That we know. We know that for a fact."

"Come, darling. Please. No one gets hurt in God's comforting dwelling," begged Lizzy many times, taking turns with both her sister and her niece to bend the prickly relative to proper rites and rules.

"If I do that, what will you promise me?" asked Josie. She sat there, nibbling on an ear of corn. "What will I do in heaven? Knit?"

Little Melly was the first to turn into a pessimist. She couldn't close her eyes to the accumulating evidence: it was slow progress all the way.

Not even at revival time, when preachers left the sinners gasping, as though flattened by a roller, to sob away the last of their transgressions, where might you look for Josie? Velocipeding, verily, the length of Mennotown!

"I just want privacy. I'm not in any contest," said Josie. That was her one refrain.

"Look, Josie dear—"

"Please call me Josephine," said Josie, spear in hand.

But Little Melly didn't easily give up. The faithful, knowing what was good for them and, by extension, Josephine, all streamed into her brother's budding congregation. The bells tolled festively, and Little Melly, who pointedly spurned finery of cloth—in contrast to some folks she knew—marched gingerly ahead of everybody else, come Wednesday prayer services. She always sat, demurely, a little to the back, where she could estimate attendance and help her brother judge the offerings.

She never missed a service. Never. She was the first, arriving early, all gentle smiles and lowered lashes, and was the last to leave.

By contrast, Josephine luxuriated in her clear, translucent nature and shied from all commitments to the Lord. Her spirit ran in all directions; her spirit always broke away. She stood and smiled at everyone. She stood, next to the wisdom teeth that Doctorjay had on display, while sucking on a penny candy. And though in time she kept within herself the anarchy she'd brought from the old country, she started as a thorn in everybody's side, and that's where she dug in.

For one, she was unladylike.

She didn't shriek when startled by a mouse, as Little Melly did, she merely pushed the wayward rodent gently with her foot to give it a chance to escape. When Little Melly shrieked much as a sea gull shrieks—a piercing shriek that brought Jan and his foreman running—why, Josie laughed so hard she had to cross her legs.

Another thing: she had no taste for patient toil. She sneaked

forbidden snoozes in the middle of the day.

She read voraciously as well. She'd hide behind a haystack where it was dry and quiet, to curl up with a book. At night, she stuck a candle in a bottle and read until all hours.

She was a wastrel, furthermore, discarding her shoes long before they had holes. She didn't gather crumbs left over from a wedding feast to feed them to the chickens. She didn't even worry over drafts that could have carried measles, mumps and worse. She kept throwing open windows. Though it was only Thursday and lots of chores left to be done, she dipped blithely into her Saturday bath.

A more frivolous creature than Josie was hard to imagine, unless you counted Abigail, a Donoghue, one of a world apart.

Next, Josie stalked the laying hens that strayed. For years, she had no money of her own; she traded eggs she found for postage credit at the store. She used that postage credit to ship clandestine missives back to Russia, addressed to Uncle Benny.

She gobbled Uncle Benny's letters as though they were rare morsels.

Those letters caused a lot of arguments. They were addressed to everyone, for he knew better, certainly, than to waste ink on one small relative alone. By custom and propriety, his meditative missives made the rounds from home to home for many weeks, but always ended up with Josie. She hoarded them. She gently ironed out the creases and then re-read the cripple's careful compositions.

She did that many times. By candlelight.

Since she had never been to school, nobody knew how she had learned to read, but read she did; she gobbled reading, a curious light in her wide-open, unseeing eyes. She drew a secret nourishment from every Uncle Benny letter; they roused her to ideas and perceptions.

Thus she grew up—apart.

She lived an intense inner life, and guarded it that way. She

sought out nobody for company and gossip. She did not fit herself into the quilt of Mennotown that centuries had stitched. Come thunderstorms, she didn't pray and wail to ward off punishment; she stood and watched the thunderstorms, alone. For company, she didn't need a soul.

Take Little Melly, for comparison, who stood there, at the ready, just waiting for the nod. She would have gladly served as model; she could have taught her prickly younger cousin how to stir the lye into the grease that made a potent soap with which to wash a future husband's socks.

But was her offer taken up? No chance.

At intervals, the youngster chose the melancholy company of oldsters. They loved to chat with her. With ample time on their gnarled hands as they sat, nodding, by the stove, just waiting to be gathered to their fathers, they welcomed Josephine. Of what she talked with them, for hours at a time, was anybody's guess.

She was fond of an old, diabolical cat.

Worse yet, it was an open secret, before too long, that Josie kept a spurious friendship with the Finkelsteins of Wichita. That race's sins were secret. The tsars had ripped open their nostrils.

"Sometimes," sighed Little Melly, a fine sheen on her face, addressing prayer after prayer against a certain outcome too horrible to contemplate, "I think we aren't good enough for you. Yet man proposes, God disposes. What do you make of that fine motto, Josephine?"

"Just a proverb. Never proven."

If all else failed, she started hiccuping—and that was long before the evidence accumulated that she leaned perilously close to things a Unitarian might believe.

"Come visit us," said Abigail as well, just rocking on her heels, and visit her she did, until there was no way but to step in and put her under house arrest, which is what Lizzy did.

For quite a while, Josie was adrift domestically as well. She had no place to call her own; she wouldn't stay with Noralee

where Dewey lay in wait with curfew laws, and there was friction, day and night, with Little Melly's rules. Of needs, she lived with Lizzy for a while—a relative of sorts—but that led to some gossip, for it was clear to all that Jan was partial to her whims.

Jan paid no heed. He was in love. He couldn't bear to leave her side. The neighborhood had ardent eyes; they saw she started looking warm and drowsy as soon as Lizzy lit her lamp so as to fluff the beds.

Jan waited for her patiently while she grew tall and willowy. He gave her ample time to learn the ways of Mennotown he wanted and expected. She still was young, not yet of a sufficient age to be entrusted with full household chores.

"Not even stomach bitters make a difference," lamented Noralee, and cuffed the healer, guffawing.

It was as though a tainted woman, snatched from the meanest streets of Wichita, had smiled at Jan, and Jan had smiled right back.

Sheer sorcery, her eyes!

The sparrows chirped that from the roof: that Josie snared the most fastidious bachelor of Mennotown with her immoral ways. The tempest of her nature soared atop the fire of her tongue, and ambush was the outcome.

After it was clear that, speaking of romance, enormous mischief was afoot, right under Lizzy's roof, it was no longer proper for Jan and Josephine to see each other socially. Hence, she was passed from house to house, much like a straying kitten, until Jan told his mother firmly that he had asked, and Josie had said yes. The day's work done, Jan would ride up the twisting trail to visit Josephine, carefully sidestepping prairie ruts, sidestepping Little Melly, who tried to stem the tide.

Jan knew that Little Melly suffered greatly. His heart was wrung by that.

"I see you as my sister," he told her more than once when she stepped in his path.

"These days, I'm no one in particular to anyone at all," grieved

Little Melly bitterly.

"You, too, will wear a wedding ring," he told her awkwardly.

"Can she stitch a hem? Can she boil an egg?"

Jan flushed with pity for her pain. "So unlike you. The girl who couldn't hurt a fly—a poisoner?"

Little Melly looked at him, and love shone from her eyes. She spoke past her constricted throat. "Jan, seeing you with her is seeing you already in a casket."

"Don't, Missy. Please—"

"If you want me to wait, I'll wait."

"No. It is quite decided."

Much deeper than a well. Much stronger than wheat twine.

"You feel naked with her. Is that it?" Her chest heaved with emotion. She stood and wrung her hands. "It is the fever, isn't it? It is the bestial fever?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"I can't just forget. I can't just pretend that you never existed."

It was a cold and dismal day. Jan stomped his feet to keep his blood from chilling. "Don't feel left out. You know that you are family."

"Me, family? That word chokes in my throat."

She was at her wits' end. She couldn't just force down her rancor. This man whom she loved more than life had raced her with the sheaves. The sun shone then. Now it was winter, chill and dreary.

Her words became sharp icicles she gouged into his heart. "If you ask me, here is the truth. She does not love you equally."

"She's still a child. She will."

"A she-wolf. Mark my word."

"It's cold," he said. "I better go."

"Come in and cuddle by the fire," said Little Melly, reduced to beggary.

But Jan just shook his head and left her standing in the snow, her future as bleak as a factory window, her handkerchief a wad.

"She's worse than Abigail," she shouted after him.

"That is ungracious, Missy," said Jan, and sent the girl who loved him more than anyone on earth just flying to her room to cry herself to sleep.

"Now, Little Melly. Face it. She is Jan's choice," said Doctorjay, not known for subtlety. "He is a normal man. She knows what being female is about."

"His choice? What choice?" Huge tears welled up in Little Melly's eyes. "She has magnetized him. She has mesmerized him. How can those feelings be called normal?"

"If it's his choice, then it's his choice," sighed Lizzy, overcome, and swallowed what she meant to add much as a goose might force down a worm. "I wish it had been you. But, Missy? What to do? What can I say? I'll help you make the best out of a desperate situation."

Here was her reasoning: far better it be Josephine than Abigail. Far better it be a capricious marriage than—God forbid!—an aging bachelor, an injury to nature.

Until the wedding day was set, Lizzy hadn't realized how deep her fear had been that Jan might never marry. Had Jan reneged on marriage altogether—which was what she had feared—why, the entire universe would have come grinding to a halt.

Therefore, not all was lost. Now, the faint scent of honeysuckle kept on wafting through the air.

"So what if she's a little wastrel now?" said Lizzy, out of earshot of the gossips. "Spreading the butter thick?"

"She'll learn." Jan laughed indulgently. "She has a fine and nimble mind. She's swift. She'll learn. There's nothing that Josie can't learn."

And, therefore, Lizzy told herself that she was overjoyed.

She idolized her son and set about to idolize his bride. When she sang Josie's praises throughout the neighborhood, it seemed as though she couldn't do enough.

"What makes me love you so?" Jan asked at times, his love slantways on Josephine—like hot, unbroken sunshine in July.

Josie opened her mouth and closed it again. That's how she went blank, at odd moments.

He didn't expect any answers. His heart was so full that it answered itself. If she tried to reply, he would cut her off.

"No, *Liebling*. No. Don't frown at me. Such a pretty face. Such sparkling eyes. I feel as though I've longed for you a long, long lifetime, Josie."

He poured over Josie whole rivers of love. He kissed her before his own mother.

At once, Lizzy ran and told Noralee, who didn't know if they should laugh or cry. "In front of his mother, he kissed her. I beg of you. Don't tell a soul."

"I won't," swore her sister, herself not a saint, and ran to tell Greta and Susie. "Jan's smitten with Josie," she wailed, and they thought so, too. Here was the drama of the decade; they made the most of it.

Josie loved Jan back, in her own way. When she heard the clop-clop-clop of his retired horse—whose only duty was to take him courting now because it was too old, by then, to pull the plow or be of any use in any other way—a sweet, reluctant warmth stole deep into her heart.

"Why me?" she asked. She sat with him on the front steps, in full view of the moon.

"Whyever not?"

She leaned against him lightly. "I'm vehement in thought and pen."

"I've never known anyone like you."

"Go on."

"What more can I say? You do things in accord with your nature."

"What stops you, then?" asked Josie. The words formed of themselves.

She liked him well enough and tried to make him happy. But there was always that ironic undertone—as if she measured Jan by his surroundings.

# Chapter 26

Two weeks before the wedding feast, Jan put his chosen next to him at Sunday *vespa* for all-around inspection. He stood beside her like a rock despite all whisperings in undertones.

Behind her son stood Lizzy. As soon as Lizzy swallowed down her bitter disappointment and reconciled herself to the inevitable—that Jan would marry Josie and not Little Melly—she prayed for Josie every night.

"Give her a sweet and humble mind," she prayed.

"Let her not stare so much into her mirror all the time," she prayed.

"No *Wienerschnitzel*, please!" prayed Lizzy, frugal to the core. "Instead, dear Lord, *vareniki*."

She prayed for Little Melly, too, for this and that—small favors!—but, loyally, the brunt of all of Lizzy's prayers went for Josie. She prayed as hard for Josephine as she had ever prayed for any friend or foe, but Lizzy's prayers, sadly, made no dent: Josie favored *Wienerschnitzel*.

Next, Lizzy pulled her son aside. "Do you suppose she prays at all?"

"I do not ask," Jan told his mother, frowning.

"Perhaps you should?" begged Lizzy timidly, torn sorely between conflicting duties.

Jan's gaze went past his mother's. "She told me once," said Jan, "that prayers were, for her, like sailing over dry and barren land. I've never forgotten she said that."

"Now where," asked Lizzy, frowning, "have I heard that before?" Unable to contain herself, she pointed out: "Now, Little Melly, on the other hand—"

Jan cut his mother off. "Don't. Never in my presence, Mom."

What could a mother say?

"The best is barely good enough," bragged Lizzy to her neighbors. She put her pride and energy behind her brooms. She put those brooms to work and made the spiders fly. Chop off the heads of some unlucky rooster; know that a party was on!

The wedding preparations soon wiped out every other thought from Lizzy's buzzing mind. Now that the date was set, her reputation was at stake; Jan's wedding had to be a first-class wedding, the best she could deliver.

She dipped into her cheese account, not skimping on the nickels. The end result was stacks of raisin buns and bread, smooth turkey salad, navy beans, even custard pie to top it off—the works! Just like Americans.

The wedding Lizzy planned was lavish even in the minds of those who could afford to add a worldly touch and brave enough to follow through and copy foreign ways.

That's how Jan wanted it, to please his little Josie.

Lizzy took a map and dotted all the places with red ink: the whole of the United States and Canada, by then, one kith and kin, a huge, tight net of loyal relatives—and she at the hub of it all!

"No matter what, a happy wedding it shall be," she said so often that, at last, Herbert was forced to put a damper on her boasts and tell her, mildly chiding: "Is this a first? In the entire universe?"

She smiled at him. "For me, it is. He is my only son."

In detail, she would show her brand new daughter Josie how all those relatives, all having to be notified, must now be charmed to visit Mennotown where Jan was getting married. Why, anybody doubting that need only come into her kitchen and she would take the time—would find the time!—to spell out all her wedding plans in detail.

"And, meanwhile, Josephine," she cried. "Here. Take this apron, honey. Just tie a knot. Now help me dry that pile of dishes, will you? From now on, I will wash, and you will dry. Be careful with my coffee cups. Don't clatter with the saucers."

In every respect, it was the biggest wedding feast in Kansas any settler could remember, coordinated to perfection. Cousins twice and thrice removed arrived in whistling trains. Relatives and friends came from as far away as Manitoba and Alberta—nieces and nephews, uncles and aunts, *Opas* and *Omas*—all rattling south to Mennotown across the blooming earth.

Herb's married sons and daughters came, the Ensens and the Thiessens who lived in Freeman, South Dakota. His sister's husband's family arrived—the Wiebe clan of good and humble stock, most all of whom had carved their farms out of the grass, near Lincoln, in Nebraska. The Friesens, too, related to both Noralee and Lizzy—the ones who lived near Fargo, North Dakota. The Harder clan from Mountain Lake arrived, all farmers known for their foresight and thrift. The Ungers came and stayed an entire season, watching and learning from Jan how to sack wheat so that neither time nor kernels were lost. The Janzens came as well, a family of legendary moderation, all thirty-four of them, all sitting in their wagon beds and watching carefully how neighbors parked in a straight row before they parked themselves.

Little Melly was there from beginning to end, a silent and suffering shadow. She looked as though struck in the temple.

When Lizzy tried to put her arms around the girl, she merely shook her head.

"I'm going to survive," said Little Melly bravely and in a tone so soft that it was just a whisper, then added, in a breaking

voice. "Though how I wish that Doctorjay's old mare would just run over me and end my misery."

In church she sat, her glance demurely in her lap, and didn't move an eyelash. In front of her sat Josephine—a tense but lovely bride, with every hair in place, slicked down with dabs of Lizzy's butter—and let herself be wed.

Right after Jan married Josie, Little Melly fell seriously ill.

No one expected Litte Melly to survive, what with her love in shreds and all hope gone and dead, but Doctorjay marched in one sunny afternoon where she rose feebly on one elbow, rolled up his sleeves, kicked open the drawn shutters, and told her in a voice that ended every argument: "Get well or die!" and Little Melly's fever dropped.

She started eating second breakfasts. Rich food became the balm that healed her broken heart.

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want," prayed Little Melly plaintively, and shortly afterwards became a lifelong born-again with Dewey's expert help.

It was magnificent to watch how she was treated by her fellow citizens, with singular respect. She accepted her lot without grumbling. The folks of Mennotown watched Little Melly reel, then cling to Faith as if it were her lifeline. Jan's love for her went up in flames, much like a brittle Christmas tree, but the hymns did not die on her lips. Except for Doctorjay, when he was soused sufficiently, nobody sang with more feeling.

*"Von der Eh-he-herde reiß mich los,*
*mache mei-hei-heinen Glauben groß—"*

sang Little Melly soulfully by giving it her all. She filled the air with sibilants.

That song turned out to be the bane of Josie's appetite, known to be delicate at best. She ate one egg and called that breakfast. When Little Melly launched herself into another drawn-out hymn, Josie launched into a fit. She hated it. She absolutely hated it. Her chest began to heave; her eyes began to blaze; and in those eyes the demons danced as though they craved the tossing of the

sea.

The wedding guests had scarcely time to settle their digestion, taxed by the wedding feast, when it was clear to all that serious trouble lay ahead for Jan and his young bride.

Not that there were a lot of bitter words or copious tears; those were not Josie's ways. She just kept rocking in her little wicker chair while making faces at the dog. And everybody knew that when she grudged the jilted spinster girl the comfort of her songs, she was uncharitable in undeserved affluence, while Little Melly, holy-rollering, her eyes blurred with her memories, just sat there, humming to herself between long pauses and deep sighs, while forcing down large gobs of gruel Doctorjay kept prescribing for her.

Little Melly was a martyr whose wounds refused to heal. "Lucky me. Oh, lucky me," claimed Little Melly, spooning. "For now that I am born again, how can I hold a grudge?"

The neighbors sympathized. Whereas Josie hoarded grudges as though there would be shortages tomorrow, there were no grudges whatsoever in Little Melly's heart that the good neighbors could discern. With not a whimper she had laid to rest the biggest grudge of all: that Josie had stolen her wedding.

Romantic suffering clung to Little Melly's shoulders like a thick, gray, clammy mist, but she didn't give herself over to sorrow. Now she identified with any creature's suffering. She kept a little burial plot for all those little birds that Josie's cat kept dragging from the bushes. That cat was definitely of the Devil. Some people saw it crouching and claimed that it laid eggs. From the moment it appeared, the dog kept pinning back his ears.

"Scat, cat! Get out from underfoot!" The world was fast forgetting, but Dewey's saintly sister kept whispering her cues.

For her church, Little Melly developed commendable zeal. Her Lord was on her side; He promised glory if you served Him, chastisement if you slighted Him, and so, when Josie set her cap for Jan, and Jan went blind with love, she didn't reckon with a

script already fixed by Providence.

All Little Melly had to do was wait.

"I have my Faith," said Little Melly, "to see me through. To steady me. To deliver me safely to Heaven."

And it was true; she had her safety net. Her Savior stood there, waiting, His doleful eyes on Josephine who did not lean on Him, instead embracing her modernity—not thinking of the aftermath; how sad and also foolish! America was turning modern, and Wichita was, too; and Josie was already dead to shame as far as colors were concerned. Her tulips simply strutted.

When Dewey came collecting, clutching his Happy Hobie jar to be filled for some social benefit—be it a fund-raiser, a picnic or a cookout to help a cause along—there were enormous, swollen pauses. Josie hated tithing. Never gave.

Yet she squandered Jan's money. She bought and bought, however frivolous. No sooner was Jan's money in her purse than it melted in her hands.

Spring chicken, 7 cents a pound!

Wart remover, two dimes a bottle!

Bust cream, along with castor oil, as much as thirty cents!

Whenever fancy beckoned, Josie went out shopping. Jan would laugh and flick her nose, while Lizzy tried with all her might to stem the spendthrift tide with chiding looks and many sighs. In the deepening frowns of her clan, she read doom. She tried to keep harsh words from jumping from her tongue: she didn't say a word when Josie went to buy a grass-green parasol, and then a double belt, and finally a set of sparklers for both ears. There was no end to it.

Lizzy marshaled a frontal attack. "This is America. We're plain folks here. Are you not lovely as you are? Jan seems to think you are."

"Well, I—"

"With your blond hair? With your blue eyes? You don't need adornments to spruce yourself up. Why do you do it, Josie?"

"I guess it makes me happy."

"At least, I should be told the reason."

But Josie only shrugged. She wouldn't say. She didn't even hint. "Please call me Josephine," said Josie.

Thus, she took her rebellion to the edge. The needle of her conscience was askew.

When Dewey came collecting, escorted by two deacons, there was no money left.

"Again?" asked Josephine, pushing a broom around.

"What do you mean, again? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Look how it pours," begged Lizzy, crimson, fast-talking past the preacher visitor who came, expecting courtesy and cash.

"Yes, when it pours, it pours," said Dewey heartily, unwilling to be wearied. One of the youngest prairie preachers, he was, by then, an expert in his field. "Now, Josie. Josephine. Don't you agree it is a good idea to share Jan's fortune with the Lord?"

"An excellent idea."

"Well, then?"

"Jan did already," Josie said. "He gave last week, last month and last year. Right after we married, Jan gave you a whopping donation."

"The Donoghues, as good as penniless," said Dewey pointedly.

"Their hard-luck stories never end."

"They need a hand. Unless we offer them a Christian hand, they won't be mindful of the Christian message. Just yesterday, I happened to pass by their hut. The laundry on their clothesline? Rags. Just rags with holes in them."

"I'll have a talk with Abigail. I'll give her my old dresses. If I decide to help the Donoghues, why first give the money to you?"

"Because," said Dewey righteously, "I am the steward of God's money. I do His handiwork for him. The Donoghues live right next door. At our Lord's behest, they must be born again. There is no point in helping, expecting nothing in return."

"I hear that they are Catholics. And Irish."

"All Irishmen are Catholics. That is precisely why."

"Well, left and right, I wish you luck," said Josie, heartlessly,

and steered him by the elbow. She held his coat. She walked him to the door and pushed him out into the rain and even snapped the parlor lock—except, of late, she didn't call a parlor parlor; she called it living room.

She was, to say the very least, extremely un-neighborly.

Jan knew she did not love him equally. She continued to tarnish Jan's reputation. She continued to squander his money.

Jan laughed and drew her on his knees. "Now look at you. Is that a brand new collar scarf? Are you my girl on a flying trapeze?"

She quieted in his presence. "You are as calming to my heart as raindrops hitting on a roof," she told him once, and he had no reply.

There was no end, between those two, to ornamental talk, most of it furnished by Josie.

"You make me drowsy with your love," she told him at another time, and he tucked that away.

Jan lived on very little. He found a lot of sheepish smiles for her modernity. He thought she was the wonder of the universe.

"What is your name?" asked Jan, and gave her a kiss on the tip of her nose.

"My name," said Josephine, "is still disappointingly vague."

"She is a stranger," Lizzy said. She grieved and knew not why.

"She is a child. She means no harm," said Jan, who was no longer half the man he should have been among his friends and relatives.

"A child? Where is the wooden paddle?"

She even went so far as to frequent a carnival the Hebrews brought to Wichita. She was thicker than thieves with the Wichita Jews. She claimed they were an interesting tribe.

There was no reason whatsoever to be so tolerant of whim. Dewey spoke prophetic words to many significant nods: "Jan, hear me out. A woman is like fire. She warms and beautifies. But Jan! Pay heed! Flames have to be contained."

"She'll learn. There is nothing that Josie can't learn." Jan's voice caught in a burr.

Jan was forever looking for excuses, although his young wife spurned the most convenient quilting bee that Lizzy spied for her.

She walked through her first year of marriage as though she wore a peacock feather in her hat; she asked why Jesus was a lamb; she spoke licentious words, like Mississippi, a state just packed with sibilants reminding them of peepee; she overcooked her beans; the rosebush snagged her skirt; a brand new butter churn meant not a thing to her; pie eating contests left her cold. Most telling of all, she denied herself nothing. Jan calmly took out his wallet and forked over the pennies and nickels she craved.

When he did that, she shone her prettiest smile. She knew what it meant to be female. Though Jan had set his jaw and married Josie, in defiance of his town, when she was barely sixteen years of age and he was twice as old, she did not show her gratitude. He gave her all she wanted, needed and admired—and it was not enough.

She left a trail of bitter feelings. No wonder she became the butt of snickering. No wonder she became the object of stern gossip. She said she would not die of overwork. She was sunning herself in the sun.

Not even Lizzy could afford to close her eyes to the accumulating evidence: she wouldn't sing; she wouldn't pray; she did not even cross her sevens. She did precisely as she pleased; Jan let all that pass by. She read, she slept, she walked and sunned herself, no matter what the workload or the season.

Instead of reading poetry, if poetry it might be called, she could have milked a cow.

Lizzy leafed through chapter after chapter of her Bible with Little Melly's help, but decades would roll in like heavy boulders and build a wall no one could penetrate.

Ahead lay grievous years.

Lizzy fetched a cross-stitched apron and proudly shared her favorite recipe.

"Now, let me teach you, Josie. Jan likes his bread just so."

"The kitchen, as I understand the rules, is now my place," said Josie, in a vain attempt to shake off Lizzy's influence, but victory rested with Lizzy.

She was forever after Josie for learning this and that. She was so eager to induct her brand new daughter into the mysteries of rising yeast she launched herself at once.

"First, scald three cups of milk. Mix salt and flour. Now add foam. Knead smartly on a floured board until the dough feels like a sponge. Keep kneading, Josie—keep it up. No, no. Don't push so hard. Be gentle, Josephine. See how I do it? So? Keep on until small bubbles explode in your hand. Be gentle, Josie. So. Like so. I said like so!"

"You said that already," said Josie.

"I did?"

"You did. Why do you repeat yourself? Always?"

They stared at one another. Lizzy was sure that a chicken bone had lodged in her throat.

You couldn't point a finger and say she, Lizzy, didn't try. She plain outdid herself with Josie. She taught her every rule a newly-wed must know. She even tried to spell them out on some white space she spied in an old almanac, but only broke her pencil.

While this was going on, Little Melly smiled seraphic smiles. Her smiles told all. Her prayers were divided equally between her yesterdays and her tomorrows. Her waistline grew thicker and thicker.

In months to come, Lizzy made sure she said to anybody who would listen: "No more obedient relative the length and width of Kansas."

What else could Lizzy say? It would be a shame to spoil illusions.

"Josie and I do the dishes together," cried Lizzy, a warrior on

behalf of family.

*Ach ja?*

"She washes, and I dry."

"If you say so. *Ach ja!*"

It was as if Jan had taken a thorn and pushed it deep into the heart of Mennotown, and here was the result! Since Lizzy clearly didn't have the spine to stomp her foot and make sure rules were followed, the neighbors put their heads together and started making lists.

Don't zigzag. Please walk straight.

Take off your apron when it's Sunday.

Don't nick your coffee cup.

All this was for Jan's benefit. It was discussed at length and seen as a grave matter: just how to help Jan's child-bride run her chores?

For Jan, now proudly married, growing more sedate and solemn in his ways, sat willingly among the portly Elders.

# Chapter 27

No sooner had the last of many laggard wedding guests departed and Jan and Josie settled into habit and routine, than Little Melly started circulating the dark rumor as a cat might circle cream.

It was too soon, however, to speak with candor of a fact and not mere supposition. That way, you savored your suspense. That's how you squeezed a rumor.

"I refuse to believe it," said Lizzy.

Her mouth was dry as powder. Her heart was wild with grief. When Little Melly canvassed Lizzy's face, she knew: as good as a public confession.

"You know what people say."

"You speak in riddles," Lizzy muttered, now speaking in a voice that you could barely hear. "I know my son," squawked Lizzy, loyally. "He's for propriety."

Yet all the while, she heard her heart pound with foreboding. If it were true, and all the signs were pointing to that possibility—just mention chicken skin and watch Jan's Josie bolt straight for the dented bucket—the stain would never go away.

"Tell me it isn't true," demanded Little Melly next, while standing in the door and savoring suspense. "So I can tell the neighbors and put their minds at rest."

Lizzy always welcomed Little Melly's company—so on this nippy Wednesday morning as the November leaves kept rustling to the earth. The first chill had set in; the fire was blazing in the hearth, and Lizzy was providing for posterity by knitting little booties. Her needles simply flew.

"Come in. Come in," cried Lizzy, her heart in her voice and her eyes full of tears. "How can I please you? Warm you? Here. Scoot up to the fire."

"Could it be true?" asked Little Melly, eyebrows arched.

The coward spoke in Lizzy. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Just asking. Just asking. That's all."

"Can you come in and stay?"

"For only five minutes," said Little Melly, modestly, settling on the davenport for the remainder of the day.

Now that her dream of sharing life with Jan had come to naught, she was entitled to consideration from the clan. On Lizzy's davenport she had a second cup of coffee, a third, and then a fourth, and only then was she sufficiently prepared to lace her freckled fingers, take a deep breath, and launch herself full force.

"Tell me it isn't true. She is giving rise to serious gossip. Where is she, by the way?"

"Well, snoozing still."

Little Melly inhaled deeply. "It's nine o'clock."

"My, how time flies," sighed Lizzy, one of the world's worst liars.

Little Melly kept fanning herself with excitement. It was her passion and her pastime to get straight to the bottom of the darkest of all rumors. "Let's see now. September. October. November. Do you suppose it's true?"

"What do I know?" wailed Lizzy, martyred thoroughly. "Nobody tells me anything."

"If not you—then, who would?"

Now Lizzy was dabbing her eyes. "She's mum. He's mum. I'm as perplexed as you. Is that a way to treat a family?"

"So marriage was inevitable?"

"I wouldn't go that far—"

"That's what I guessed. From the beginning." That just slipped out. No way to take it back. "Imagine that! And all the while—"

"We cannot say that yet for sure," begged Lizzy, deflecting all arrows, awash with shame and sorrow, —while knowing that this visitor, all arch and coy, all smiles and dimples, a jilted relative who claimed she'd merely come to check a rumor, would be as grim and merciless as nature.

"Just keep the kettle at a boil," suggested Little Melly spitefully. "That's my suggestion, Lizzy. Just keep the kettle on."

"Guess who's expecting now?" Jan told his mother who was picking her way through a huge pile of darning, while Josie lifted her flushed face, stuck out her chin, took a deep breath, and asked: "Expecting what? Expecting guests?"

She favored watermelon rind—the saltier, the better. When invited to help disembowel the Saturday rooster, she vanished.

All that was whispered first to Noralee who took the story to the quilting bee, from where it spread as far as Hillsboro and Hesston, where it caused nonstop talk. The air was thick with wrath.

At intervals, Lizzy was canvassed, drained of the latest news and notified that worse was yet to come.

"No clue if we are right or wrong? Why not prod Doctorjay?"

"No clue. I did already. Yesterday. I prodded Doctorjay."

"Well, what precisely did he say?"

"He said it could be either way."

"No!"

"Yes!"

*"Ach!"*

"He held up his ten fingers, then carefully tucked in his thumb."

"What does that mean? Why does he speak in riddles?"

"He always takes her side."

"The calendar will settle it," said Little Melly firmly, while helping herself to some excellent cheese.

Lizzy knew she stood on quaking ground, but she took Josie's side. "He claims it is a medical curiosity that the first pregnancy could end most anytime. He said not to jump to conclusions."

"Let's settle down and wait." Little Melly let go of her breath. Her knees shook with her victory.

A margin child was verily the worst of all conceivable disasters, next to the agony of Jesus.

The ones for whom suspense proved more than they could bear sat stoutly and judgmentally on Lizzy's porch to get a better profile.

"At the latest, the middle of June—" the neighborhood said, for the matter was still not decided.

The questions grew louder and louder. "If it's earlier than that, then we know."

Poor Lizzy! In the hot seat! Her heart wrung like a dishrag, just hanging on to shreds of dignity, she clung to hospitality: "Here. Take the center cut. Out of the middle, please."

Little Melly was knitting, determined to finish that sock before she ran out of yarn. The knitting needles started dancing gently while she spoke evenly:

"Look, Lizzy, dear. You must speak up. Now is the time to speak your mind before it is too late. Your roof. Your family. Your reputation, Lizzy."

Lizzy, by then, all but sobbed. "But I don't even know if it is true or not. How would I know? And I can't bring myself to ask. How would I ask? What would I say? We don't discuss these matters."

Little Melly's pale eyes held glee and contempt. "Here's how you do it, Lizzy. You sit her down and ask: 'Could it be true? Tell me it isn't true.'"

"How could I possibly—"

"January. February. March," said Little Melly, while counting on her chubby fingers. "Let's see now. *Ach ja.* It's just as Dewey said. My brother said just yesterday—"

This was much worse than what Lizzy had feared. "You mean to say that Dewey knows?"

"You bet he does. Of course he knows. Here's what he said, at Wednesday night Devotions—"

"Right at Devotions? Oh, my God!"

"He said—well, never mind! I won't repeat what Dewey said because, dear Lizzy, dearest Lizzy, if I repeated what he said, then it would break your heart."

After a painful, sleepless night, Lizzy did what Lizzy must and started questioning the newlyweds to pucker the pulsating boil.

"I know it's not my place to ask. But still. Is there not something I should know?"

"Don't speak in riddles, Mom," said Jan, his warm eyes on his bride. "We love each other very much. We're planning a surprise."

She ran and drew the shutters. "What are you saying, Jan? The baby might arrive tomorrow?"

"Jan. Make her stop," said Josephine. She spoke in a low voice.

Jan laughed, completely in the dark. That man had not a clue. "Why? Don't begrudge them their delight. The neighborhood is having fun."

"At my expense."

"It's just a game. It doesn't mean a thing. It's merely entertainment."

She shook as if from a violent fever. "Some game. Please. Make them stop."

"Give them a set of newlyweds, and watch what happens next."

"Jan, make them stop. It hurts."

"This is big gossip, darling." Jan laughed and kept patting

her tummy. "Pay no attention. Just ignore it. It matters not at all. I married you, right? Though the odds were against you? Did I not marry you?"

When she broke into tears, Jan lifted her and cradled her, depositing her carefully, and told her in a trembling voice: "Your eyes, my pet, when you are wronged—like splashes of clear water."

"I'm not your pet."

"Of course you are."

"Why did you, Jan?"

"Why did I what?"

"Why did you marry me?"

"What do you mean? You knew that I would marry you. I had to marry you. The neighborhood? It's just hen party talk."

"But I—"

"Don't give it so much weight. Pay no attention, Josie. Just take yourself out of harm's way. Here. Here's a little something for your bruises."

Jan was that way. No matter how she bruised, he laughed. No matter what she said, he teased and tickled her. He reached into his pockets and fished out the coins that were clanking inside.

"Let Doctorjay take you to town and buy yourself a little something, will you? If there's a need to talk your female apprehensions over with somebody, have a long talk with Doctorjay."

But even Doctorjay turned out to be a traitor. "Jan married you, of course," said Doctorjay, and giggled gleefully, "to save you from disgrace. The way you and your fella carried on—

"He shouldn't have," said Josie. She drew back from the healer whom she liked well enough.

"Heh! You in the family way."

"Don't talk like that. I hate it. It's despicable."

"Huh? What's it now?"

"I said don't talk like that."

"What did I do? It's you who carried on. You tempted him.

And now there's hell to pay."

"There was no need for that," said Josie bitterly.

"No need for what?"

"No need to marry me. Why did Jan marry me?"

"Well, girlie. What a question!"

"I want to know."

"And you in the family way!"

"So what?"

"It's all your fault. You weren't simon-pure. You weren't maidenly."

"It's always women's fault?"

"Of course. Not since Eve tempted Adam has it been otherwise."

Shame came to Josie imperceptibly. At first, she didn't even notice when it came creeping up on her like mildew on an apple.

She was a married woman now, cut off from youth, expected to obey decorum. At first, she sauntered through a Sunday afternoon, flushed rosy with her pregnancy, barefoot and mystified, and gave no thought to muddy toes. She merely wiggled them to tease the cat a bit. But soon that changed. All changed.

To help her preacher brother all the while, Little Melly made herself a solid influence in his congregation by proffering a moral rectitude that amplified conformity. And not a day too soon.

There was a lot to do in general to build His vineyard and strengthen His commandments—primarily by stringent ten-percenting nobody would have dared, excepting Josephine, to challenge then or now. Jan's scandalously spend-thrift wife reflected shamefully on Dewey's tithing goals, a fact that Little Melly pointed out at every opportunity.

"The net result," said Little Melly sprightly, "is lack of harmony."

"That's true. That's true," admitted Lizzy, wretchedly, for Lizzy valued harmony. There was no way around the fact that Josie wasted money. She wouldn't window-shop. She never checked the price of anything, ignoring the fetchingest bargains.

"Toilet soap—3 cakes for 15 cents!" said Little Melly, eyebrows raised.

"A trifling sum," said Lizzy lamely.

"But human nature being human nature," said Little Melly softly, "she'll want to keep that up. Next thing you know she'll want the kind of soap that floats."

"I'll teach her how to stir the lye," decided Lizzy resolutely.

"She'll run through Jan's money like water. I see the writing on the wall. The future is bleak, dearest Lizzy."

"You're still in the dark?" asked Little Melly every day. The burning question squatted on a hundred eager tongues. The neighborhood would often get together for pivotal updates, sharing many cups of coffee, thinking up between them innovative ways in which to offer help and remedy to Jan's young, inexperienced bride.

In Little Melly's narrow life, her friendship for Jan's mother spelled loyalty, writ large. She came over as often as duties permitted. The goose path grew wider and wider. She brought along her knitting to finish a difficult heel.

"I am afraid to ask," wailed Lizzy wretchedly, wide and bewildered eyes on Little Melly. "I am as much in the dark as you are. Worse, even. Trust you me."

"What did I tell you, Lizzy?"

But hoping against hope was Lizzy's specialty. "I always said she was too thin. Maybe she's filling out? Her appetite's improving. I noticed that. I'm glad she's eating now."

"She's never had a balmy stomach."

"And now it's worse. It's even worse. Her stomach has been queasy for a week. One trifling lump in my good mashed potatoes, and there she goes. Off to the outhouse. Running."

"Most people would agree that is unusual." Little Melly fanned herself excitedly with one of Lizzy's cross-stitched napkins, a fine sheen on her face. "Let's see now." She fastened herself on suspense like a shrimp. "Admit it. We might as well know. Where is your calendar? Let's cross off week by week.

That way, we won't forget."

As if Little Melly could ever forget! She was there, at that frolicking wedding, her own glance in her blameless lap.

"Their wedding, the last week of August—" said Lizzy, just sitting there, knitting away but dropping a few stitches.

Little Melly simply let the corners of her mouth drop sadly and fixed her eyes demurely on her shoes. No margin left for pity. Not in a long, long lifetime! "And here it is barely November. And all that hard-earned money, just wasted on a veil."

In weeks to come, triumph was Little Melly's badge. There was none sweeter. None.

She had been set and ready to go to her grave, replete with broken heart, but thanks to Dewey's prayers and lots of sympathy from everyone, she had pulled through and healed herself; in fact, she felt stronger than ever.

It was Josie now, deep in a jam. It was she who would want to plug up her ears with her fingers. She'd want to hide herself away in the crawl space between the ceiling and the roof.

"It's definite!" concluded Little Melly, so loud that Lizzy jumped. "At first, I didn't believe it. I still can't believe it. I can't."

"You were right after all. Oh, my God!"

"I couldn't help myself," said Little Melly, now falling back, exhaling. "I had to bring it up."

"Who could blame you?" asked Lizzy, tears welling in her eyes just like a mountain spring.

"Have you discussed it yet with anyone?"

"Yes. Herbert. Only Herb."

"And Herbert thought so, too?"

Yes. Herbert thought so, too."

Little Melly kept nibbling on a zwieback. "And all the while," said Little Melly silkily, "that hussy acted more and more as though she were descended from some royal line. Just picking herself through a picnic."

Lizzy sighed deeply, defeated. Bad days lay ahead, at cost of

Jan's name and Jan's pride.

"I wouldn't be surprised if the good Lord now snarled her tongue for being such a hypocrite," concluded Little Melly. "That's my opinion, hear? Just my opinion, Lizzy."

She wanted dumplings. Period. She said: "I hate *vareniki*!"

That almost was the straw that broke the camel's back, for Lizzy was now digging in her heels to rescue what was left of domesticity. The dog was whimpering. The cat hid in the bushes. The curtains twitched the length of Main Street, Mennotown—for this was drama, this tug-of-war, to spice the universe a bit!

"Did you hear that? Did you?" cried Noralee whose traits did not include diplomacy. Her belly shook with mirth.

"Now, pay attention, girlie," she counseled Josephine. "You've got to understand some facts. Dumplings won't do. If you don't learn to cook *vareniki* just so, Jan cannot show his face."

There were a hundred nods in unison, while Josie shook her head.

"See, it's like this. You're married now, and anything you do or say will bolster or diminish your husband's reputation. That's how it is. There's nothing you can do. Come Friday night, it's got to be *vareniki.*"

"But why?"

"Why? Why, she asks? On account of the leftover curds."

"So?"

"The markets are closed on the weekends. You can't let the curds go to waste."

Jan smiled indulgently when Josephine complained: "Those kitchen raids. Exhausting." In one long breath, it all came out. "I've had it. Up to here! I've had it with *vareniki*!"

"That is exaggerated. Surely!" Jan stretched his legs. He kept on blowing smoke rings. A smile sat on his face.

"I hate *vareniki.* I absolutely hate them! They smell like sour rags."

"Look, they mean well. They want to help, not harm you."

"I'd rather do without."

Jan stroked across her hair and whispered that he loved her. She was his baby bride who still sat on his lap, all arms and legs, all bristling indignation. He started rocking her while sharing private smiles with his surroundings.

"Look. It means nothing whatsoever. It's such a small concession."

"Dumplings?" shrieked Lizzy, horrified, unable to believe her ears.

"Just feed it to the chickens."

"We cannot waste the curds on chickens. And if we let it sit another week, the maggots—"

"Just stop it, please—" begged Josie, tremulous, a fine sheen on her forehead. "I can't. I simply can't. I tried."

"But Jan wants his *vareniki* just so—"

"If Jan wants his *vareniki* just so," cried Little Melly fiercely, "why, lovey! Lovey! All he has to do is ask!"

Little Melly tried her best to help Josie adjust to matrimonial exactitudes in many innovative ways. She, Noralee and Lizzy put their experienced heads together frequently to come up with helpful tips to help her run her household more domestically. They recruited the neighbors as well. The front gate kept creaking and creaking.

"We'll show you, Josephine. We'll teach you how to mix the lye with grease. There's nothing like strong, home-stirred soap. The Hebrews' penny soap is feckless by comparison."

"I like it fine. It's pleasant to the touch."

"It's much too slippery. It's nothing but bubbles and foam."

"But it smells nice and clean."

"Why don't you make your own? There's nothing that beats homemade soap."

"The first step is leftovers."

"You've got to start saving leftovers."

"Save everything. Here is a dripping pan."

"See that big glob of grease right at the bottom of your broiler?"

Josie's neck took on a mottled color. She bent to pet her pet. She took small, shallow breaths.

"Here. Take this spoon. Don't waste your drippings, dear. They smell a bit rancid, but once you stir them in with lye, drippings have awesome powers."

"Lye eats through everything. Jan's socks will smell like new—"

It was too much. It was sheer overload. The child-bride up and bolted for the outhouse, and Little Melly, watching, decided she knew why.

"A margin child?" asked people everywhere, the way you might spit out a fly. The rumor drew concentric circles. It kept the town in tight suspense. It reached as far as Winnipeg, and Lizzy, who never had had any reason to be vague or blurry about anything, now looked for broadening excuses to defend Josephine.

This made for many a sleepless night, for just as soon as she encountered yet another neighbor, she would be pressed to answer: "No clue yet, Lizzy dear?"

"She's skinny like a bean pole, and that is why she shows."

What could poor Lizzy do? The neighbors gave the culprit lots of good, hard stares, but the girl had a mind of her own. Her belly, rounding gently, was being patted constantly. Advice rained down at intervals, and Lizzy tried her best, and more besides, to reform Josephine. She tried to coax her back into her kitchen and to her wifely chores, but when she finally succeeded, it was a pyrrhic victory because Jan's Josie brought her bosom buddy, Abigail, who cooked up spicy casseroles from questionable recipes.

The treason had come from within.

# Chapter 28

"It was the Hebrew painting that proved the ultimate insult," said Josephine to Erika before she passed away, all but a centenarian. "That's where it all began."

The decades have not dimmed that story.

The smut you see on television now, the relatives said, wrathfully, while filling in detail, all started with that picture—for Josie, many years ago, threw every caution to the wind and let the Hebrews in her parlor, who, even then, were claiming smut for art and pushing to forsake all modesty.

This portrait story is so vividly embedded in the collective memory of Mennotown that even after all the years that have since passed into eternity, it still is told as though it happened yesterday.

"Let's look for it," said Erika.

They helped her look—in attics and in cellars, in boxes and in bins—and when at last they found it, this after Josie told them to go look yet one more time behind the antique chest that stored the chipped and yellowed knickknack of a discarded century,

Josie's face was awash with emotion.

Old Josie knew her relatives. All their shenanigans.

She knew that one day, when she wasn't vigilant, her mind on something else, the clan had hidden it. But where?

"That was my rebellion to end all rebellions," said Josie who, by then, had outlived all her enemies.

When she said that, her blue eyes, full of roguery and mischief, still sparkled as of old.

Here's how the story goes.

The seams in all her clothes let out as far as they would go, young Josie took a hefty chunk of Jan's good, hard-earned money and had her belly drawn. She chose a shady artist, whose name was Finkelstein - a name which, by itself, spoke volumes.

A blizzard blew this fellow Finkelstein into the middle of her parlor one wintry afternoon—a storm that blew so hard you couldn't see the barn door.

"Come in. Come in," said Josephine to Finkelstein. "A glass of tea? A slice of this fine cherry pie? How can I please you? Warm you?"

He started to unload his easel.

No one knew from whence the Jew had come. Worse, nobody ever found that out. He claimed he was related to rich bankers of dubious repute. His boasting his connections never stopped.

Finkelstein gave Josie chivalrous splashes of color.

"You have good eyes. A carefully cut mouth."

He knew how to flatter and fawn. He made his brushes dance, while Lizzy, Daisy, Noralee and Little Melly did wrathful sentry duty by the door.

"A face too good to waste," the Hebrew said, his tongue between his teeth, his thumb on the palette.

It was as if she took an alien thorn and pushed it deep into the heart of Mennotown, and here was the result! She opened her door to this stranger and let him step into her kitchen, while Jan was busy at the mill. Jan didn't even learn about her wanton deed until his mother took him by the sleeve and whispered it to

him.

"She sat for an entire morning," wept Lizzy, mortified, "while with a dozen brushes he kept on stroking every contour of her belly—"

Jan dusted the flour from his trousers. "It's not as though she's hiding a secret disease."

Lizzy was profoundly shocked. "She's showing," shrieked Lizzy, two purple spots high on her cheeks. "She ought to stay inside, concealed from view, knit booties, and wait out her time—"

But Jan looked at his mother steadily and said in a calm voice: "A woman's body is a thing of beauty. That's all she wants to say."

The goslings arched their necks. The chickens spread their wings. The dog rose quietly from the porch and put his paw on Lizzy's knee, as Lizzy bent her face to him to hide from her beloved son how deeply shocked she was.

"It's just a portrait, Mom. It's just a painting. She wants something by which to remember—"

"She's got her wedding photographs! Did Herbert not make sure the picture man took all the pictures at her wedding anyone would ever want to keep? Befitting a family album? She was as pretty then as she will ever be. It's downhill from now on."

It was a clever portrait—so real it caused a sensation. On seeing it, Jan liked the painting. He put much store in it. He even hammered home the nail, above the fireplace.

There hung his Josephine, her eyes not on her toes, demurely, but in some misty distance, her shame beneath her hoops and ruffles for all the world to guess.

"A masterpiece," said Jan, and stopped the flying bullets, thus giving her a kind of freedom that still bewildered everyone.

Throughout her pregnancies, Jan stood behind her chair, warm hands on both her shoulders.

"Now that you've had your way, will we have peace around here, Josie?"

That portrait was, for her, the one triumphant product that issued from that year. She drew from it a hidden strength. It was one of her proudest possessions. She studied it often—the girl in that picture.

"As colorful as anemones," she said to Jan, as though she described a stranger.

How had a complacent clan bred such a rebel as Josie? They tried their best to coax her back into the ethnic quilt, but Josie, by then, ate the wind.

The joyful day arrived when Dewey married Daisy.

Both had been baptized solemnly and, thus, were fit to be a proper couple, well past the age of folly—where Josie stuck as though she were an ant, trapped in a honey pot.

The marriage went as all foresaw, blessed amply by the Lord. The course of time brought many children to this couple, all of whom would remember, this to the very days they died, to hang their heads and close their eyes when asking for God's bounty.

Little Melly saw to that.

Nothing left better to do with her discarded life, Little Melly took herself a narrow room in Dewey's dusty attic, where she unpacked herself and took brisk charge of Dewey's household duties.

Now she and Daisy Epp, two expert, energetic ladies in far more ways than one, set out to bolster Dewey's congregation, of late besieged by Unitarians who had a sinister agenda, it being infiltration into the One True Faith. These two became the Lord's dispatchers, with Dewey the tailwind.

That way, all was not lost. "My Bible. My hymnal. My Book of Devotions," said Little Melly, nudging Daisy, with whom she was on admirable terms. "What more can I expect?"

Whenever she spoke of the Gospel, a flame would blow over her face.

Now that no doubt was left pertaining to the matter of the margin child, it was concluded firmly and judgmentally that Josie

had, in fact, in her own youthful folly, abandoned virtue for the urges of a man, ripe with the scents of summer.

There was no way to live it down. No way! Wherever Josie showed her face as her confinement time drew near, the conversation slowed into a trickle.

The menfolk smoked until the air turned blue, and gave her sidelong glances. The ladies, once they found their tongues, kept nodding at the calendar. The gossip never stopped.

Josie didn't take it lying down. She wore her polka-dotted Sunday dress on Saturday.

Cursed with the questing spirit, she said that she was going places—no way to stop her now!—and off she went, to Wichita, sometimes alone, sometimes with Abigail.

The Donoghues, with their limp curtains and lax standards of deportment, were not the worst that could befall Jan's reputation; the Donoghues still marched in single file; they all had itchy hands and cagey eyes, haranguing the entire neighborhood about the missing document. They still lived next to nowhere. They still they gave Jan the evil eye and muttered threats and worse.

But Josie claimed that Abigail had personality. She went so far as to insist there was some beauty even in a spider.

Jan didn't say one word against or for the situation. It was slow going all the way, for Josie's chief trait was her doggedness—pugnacity in matters big or small.

Jan was caught in-between. He had a mother and a wife; he knew the tug of two demanding women, both of whom nestled in his heart. Jan's patience was a rubber band; it stretched and stretched but didn't snap; he never raised his voice.

"What is it, darling? Now?"

Her face was flaming with vexation. "We're baking again! We're cooking again! For two weeks in a row, we've been baking and cooking! Just baking and cooking! Two weeks!"

"Visitors are coming Saturday," Jan pointed out. "Among them, angel child, four worthy cousins we haven't seen for years—"

"Then let them eat salad," hissed Josie. The rhododendrons died of shock!

"They'll be staying for three weeks," beamed Lizzy, giving it her all, for when it came to family, just half-and-half was never good enough.

"Three weeks?" shrieked Josephine.

"Three weeks. That is the minimum."

"I'm out of yeast."

"How could you! Josephine! How could you?" chided Lizzy, abandoning forbearance, now wagging a stern finger. "Did I not teach you only yesterday—"

"She's kidding, Mom! She's only kidding!"

"I'm only trying to be helpful—" sniffled Lizzy, wounded to the core. "She isn't kidding, Jan. Do not deceive yourself."

"Mom, please."

Lizzy kept fishing for a pleated handkerchief with which to dab her eyes. "What will I tell the relatives? Last time I visited in Freeman, North Dakota, I stayed eight weeks. I call that hospitality. She's out of yeast? I'll bet you that she left it in the sun."

"No! I did not!"

"Of course you did. How could you, Josie! Tell me that! How can that be possible? Is there a reason why you left your yeast out in the sun? Now it's lost all its power!"

Taming two turkeys might have been as easy!

As weeks grew into months, Jan looked as if he carried coals between two sticks. Repeatedly, he had to throttle the harvester's motor, dig both his feet into the furrows of his land, and put an arm around his mother and his wife, the two of whom kept on besieging him. "Look, why not have some peace? Let's have some peace around here."

Lizzy stood back and swallowed her rancor. Josie did likewise, but kicking at a clump of earth so that the pieces flew.

Lizzy had a barrel of goodwill, but even she compared. She couldn't help comparing.

Had Jan wed Little Melly and not this Russian thistle, she, Lizzy, might have led a life of leisure—doing little more than darning socks and teaching fancy needlework—instead of lowering the beam of rectitude repeatedly on such a foolish female.

Incredulous, the neighborhood watched anxiously as Lizzy wasted effort to shape Jan's wife into a useful member of her clan, her neighborhood, her township and her church.

"I have but little skill for cheese," claimed Josie next, then threw her parasol into a corner with a smack. That she said before her Hillsboro guests who'd come there to see for themselves.

Had there been a hole nearby, into it Lizzy would have gladly disappeared. Her cheese was not just any cheese. It was her pride and joy. Her cheese account set her apart and brought her extra status, not even mentioning the cash. You did not slander Lizzy's cheese if you knew what was good for you.

Humiliation stinging in her eyes, she said to Josephine, therefore, more sharply than she ever spoke before to any man or beast:

"You're just saying that. To give me a good fright."

"I don't feel well."

"Oh, yes, you do. Of course you do. You just don't know it yet."

Josie couldn't be reformed, it seemed. She didn't iron handkerchiefs. She left the darning in the rain. Her carrot patch died of neglect. She forgot to put oil in her lantern.

Worse yet, she didn't eavesdrop—never. All gossip died inside her.

By contrast, Little Melly managed splendidly in her spare time to keep abreast of everything worth noticing—all the more when Daisy realized, as Little Melly did at once, and Lizzy would soon, too!—that Josephine had stripped her home, one merry afternoon, of every single doily she could find.

"I need the dresser space to write my monthly letters," claimed Josephine, and dumped the doilies in the bottom of a drawer, thereby unleashing a family feud that spread as far as Saskatoon,

Saskatchewan.

Lizzy voiced her enormous disapproval as mildly as she could.

"It is important to each one of us," said Lizzy carefully, "to serve the family harmony. Those doilies on your dresser make many cousins happy."

Josie inspected the tips of her fingers. "I am entitled to some privacy."

Of late, that was her favorite theme—her privacy. All thought revolved around her privacy—that she must have some privacy. She hoarded it; she treasured it, and wasn't that stranger than strange?

When shadows filled the meadows and butterflies stopped dancing in the sun, she took long, lonely walks, all by herself, way down by the rickety bridge. She claimed she had much to say just to herself, all from the surplus of her fantasy.

"It's very cruel, Josephine, to snub your cousins for their pains."

"Sheep run together," Josie said, and buried herself in a book.

Misery washed over Lizzy at Josie's unkind words. "Our cousins are precious to us. We look like one another."

But Josie wouldn't let herself be calmed. Her voice took on a strident pitch. "I need the dresser space to write my private letters, Lizzy. It is the only space I have that I can call my own."

"What? What about the kitchen table?"

"That's where you roll *vareniki*. The surface rocks. Do you want Uncle Benny to chide me for my lettering?"

Here was a potent argument, for Lizzy wanted to impress her long-remembered relatives at Apanlee as much as anyone. And now that Josie was in charge of safeguarding the penmanship of Mennotown, perhaps she merited a few concessions of her own? She liked to correspond. She had an even hand; in fact, her penmanship showed genius. Lizzy knew it was important to send back a perfect envelope to Apanlee. If you didn't, you stood shamed, for all the relatives in Apanlee looked down on you with haughty airs.

Had it not been for Josie's letters and her affinity for Uncle Benny, there would have been dry, dusty spells in news between the families in Mennotown and Apanlee about what happened to the relatives on both sides of the ocean. Folks liked to receive updates from abroad, but writing back was difficult, a chore nobody wanted. You just could hardly think of anything to say.

What was there to report? That the harvests were good? That the children were growing and healthy? That the good Lord supported you as long as you held up your end? Fond as she was of Apanlee, she, Lizzy, had already said all that before. At least a dozen times.

No dearth of newsy items plagued Uncle Benny, by comparison.

The letters coming back from Russia were slippery as silk, a pleasure to the eye and ear, but they lacked the robust scent of the earth as well as the promising waft of Heaven.

"There's vexing discontent in city after city," wrote Uncle Benny, by and by, a chant which Josephine repeated and took on as her own. She claimed he was extremely learned. He wrote the way he talked, his dictionary at his fingertips, still privy to the secrets in the imperial domain. He wrote to Josephine: "Three strikes already. More to come." He wrote: "There's ferment in the populace."

His letters were remarkable, all curls and snarls, especially his J's. She always generously shared with the entire clan the letters she received. But what she wrote to Uncle Benny—her tongue between her teeth, her ears the color of geraniums, sparks flying from her brows—no one could even guess.

Thus, when the doily business puckered to a boil, more lay at stake than privacy for Josie. It had to do with mischief of the kind that people nowadays call liberal and worse—disharmony. already lurking in the corners of her smile, a rupture in the ethnic quilt that did not even have a name in the last days of the expiring century.

It was as Little Melly said: "You draw your own conclu-

sions."

"Does it surprise you? Really?" asked Little Melly, eyebrows raised, and rolled her pale, blue eyes. "Why all that secrecy? It makes you wonder, doesn't it, just what is going on!"

Lizzy bit her lip until it hurt but didn't say a word. She had her second cup of coffee, her third, and then her fourth, but each was just as bitter as the first.

Next, Little Melly fixed her bluest stare. "Ghost stories filter out of Wichita. Just a few days ago, while waiting at the penny candy store, I heard a Hebrew say—"

"She never likes to be where there are lots of us," grieved Daisy, too, her mother's august daughter. "She bellyflops onto her bed the moment we come visiting—"

"That's what she's like. She's always been a loner. But why does she prefer the Finkelsteins and Solomons?"

"I guess they don't put stock in doilies!"

Lizzy's nose started dripping with sad tears. She couldn't help but notice, since she was human, too, that Little Melly's spinster parlor was loaded up with knickknacks, each one of them atop a fancy masterpiece a relative had stitched. Every spare inch of her sill was covered with daguerreotypes of older, happier days when Daisy, Jan and Little Melly had flown their kites behind the barn. The words came by themselves: "If only Jan and Little Melly—"

'Yes. How I wish that I could rest my weary spirit in a coffin—" concluded Little Melly, and Lizzy added, rounding out the sentiment: "—filled with forget-me-nots."

While Josie kept on making faces at herself in the forbidden mirror, Daisy and Little Melly became two bosom buddies, while steaming up the windows with their gossip. Work permitting, they included Lizzy as well as Noralee.

The acid sting of gossip was their weapon. They shared luxuriant coffee cups, most of all on sluggish winter days, and kept it up and kept it up until another Sunday afternoon was done.

"She may not care for doilies, but she excels at everything,"

said Lizzy, eagerly, while Little Melly's neck was streaking. "At least her aprons, always crisp. Her braid bands, near perfection." There! Let her daughter and her niece draw from omissions their conclusions as to the pillow slips that weren't changed as often. When Little Melly uttered soft protests about the doilies to keep the rankling matter at the fore, she, Lizzy, picked about her food as if she were a bird.

Next, Little Melly pointed out: "They say it is a good year for the suffragists—"

"She couldn't possibly—"

You could have cut the silence with a knife.

"I tried to ask. Her lips just snapped shut, like a fish. I take that as a no.'

"She wouldn't go that far. I don't believe that for a minute."

"You don't?"

"I don't. She wouldn't undermine Jan's manliness that way."

Deep sigh. "God knows from where that came."

The suffragettes had fantasies. Curiosity might lure Jan's darling into exploring their agenda—but Lizzy knew with certainty that, when it came to suffragettes, Jan's Josie would stop short.

# Chapter 29

Ever since the fated coronation, when the slender Russian potentate tripped awkwardly and dropped his scepter with a stony clatter, much evil hearsay spread: "Ill luck. The House of Romanov in danger."

The courtiers tried to nullify the omen, blowing off the dust that gathered on the faces of the icons. The crested tsar knelt humbly and prayed lengthily to quiet the baleful rumors. "Free beer mugs, everyone," he offered afterwards. "With the imperial crest and double-headed eagles baked into the enamel."

The crowd went wild with joy. A panic struck from nowhere. The horses charged and reared; the Cossacks drew their sabers and let their whips fall on the suddenly unruly masses. Many corpses lay about the road. The gutters ran scarlet with blood.

The ministers decreed: the coronation must go on. The music never stopped. The tsar looked at his wife for guidance: to dance or not to dance?

The Empress barely smiled. "We dance," said she, a haughty female, a cold foreigner.

Betrothed to this German princess on the deathbed of his fa-

ther, the young tsar sought her counsel on every minor matter. "We dance," he told the courtiers, echoing her words.

The couple started twirling—the tsar pale and proud, the Empress chill and beautiful. The noblemen clicked heels and kissed the ladies' hands. The sentries stood in silence behind pillars.

Outside, the dead piled up, with crushed and broken bones, like cord-wood before winter. Survivors sorted through them, weeping. Few of them would forget.

Thousands had knelt like beggars in the snowy streets of St. Petersburg when Nicholas and Alexandra came to power: "Thou shalt make Russia happy. Thy name shall be impressed in our hearts."

The wind howled bitterly. The water in the pails was frozen. A scraggly dog dug somewhere for a bone.

"Greetings, children," called the tsar, repeatedly, and waved to the people below.

Dull though he may have been, intimidated though he may have been, he had been groomed into a pleasant, pleasing ruler who strove to be the best of emperors. He looked splendid in his soldier's uniform, across his chest the blue ribbon of the Order of St. Andrei.

The people waited patiently, lined up on both sides of the street.

"Long live the Romanovs."

"God bless our Little Father."

Each winter might have seemed more difficult than the preceding year, but then the sun came out again; again the earth worms crawled about the surface, warily; once more, the lilacs and the roses were in bloom.

It had been prophesied repeatedly that luck would desert the imperial couple, but their marriage seemed happy enough. They sat on the bench in the imperial gardens, holding hands, telling each other sweet nothings.

In the south, the pacifist people kept seeding and raking and

reaping. The wind kept on rustling their sheaves.

In the imperial city built on sand and on the bones of countless serfs, three noble ladies stood on a balcony while peering at the Winter Palace through lorgnettes.

"A cousin on the throne of England, a cousin on the throne of Germany, on gracious terms with both. What else can you expect?"

"She tells him only what he wants to hear, considers only what she whispers in his ear. She thinks of us as savages."

"Let's send her to a nunnery."

"Why not lock her up in a cloister?"

"My little turtledove," the Emperor addressed his wife, expertly drawing on coquettish ardor. "You are my life. You are my love. Without you, I am nothing."

She called him "pet" and "ducky."

He sparkled with his decorations.

She dressed her daughters in the height of fashion.

The Lord endowed them early with authority; it was their inborn mandate, both were convinced they carried out His will. "Now you must learn to stamp your foot," she told him many times. "You must pound your fist upon the table."

He knew no dreams; he had no visions. No light streamed from his eyes. In hers, there was a fervent shimmer. If there was conflict at the core, she might have known; he never knew; it never troubled him; she saw to that; she kept the beggars with large sores away from him so that they would not spoil his calm. She sheltered him; she soothed him; her presence felt like moss that curled around his toes.

"Hah! Can a fish develop lungs?" the peasants asked, and shuddered.

The Empress scorned them silently, while her forbearing husband smiled at them and waved at them repeatedly. He promised them reform.

In gratitude, his subjects bared their heads. A few more years crawled on.

A minister tore off the last leaf of the Russian calendar, thirteen days behind the calendar of Europe: "The end of an era—at hand."

The noblemen raised vodka glasses and drained them with quick expertise: "Bottoms up! Bottoms up! The past is the past, forgotten already. The future will be set free with machines."

Nine million peasants, by the turn-of-century, were tilling their own land. Five hundred public schools sprawled across Russia. A well-planned strike in a city factory could cause a hated foreman to be fired.

"That's progress," said the tsar, and played another game of dominoes.

His ministers could point to well-kept foundling homes, to special taxes on the gentry's chimneys. Additional concessions yet, demanded by the curly-headed dissidents the universities spewed forth? The Empress was vociferous. The mild tsar shook his head.

He said: "Reform? See here? I sign it with my hand. I seal it with my seal. A special tax on playing cards and mirrors."

He may have said, perhaps, had only he seen clearly: "I am congenial to your cause. I am not sympathetic to your means."

He may have sensed more than he saw, but what he didn't understand, the empress clarified for him: to give in to unwarranted demands would have been just like giving in to women wearing trousers.

"We live on a mean little planet," she told him. He borrowed his opinions from the past.

His martyred grandfather, a man of great restraint and compromise, had started reform in good faith. In all affairs of state, reformers had his heart. They ran their wily words into his ears and left them there to hatch.

What did he gain? A bomb was his reward.

Somebody vaulted out of hiding, threw death, and started racing for his life, and even then some people shouted: "You smell

a Jew a *verst* away," for it was widely held that Jews were everywhere where trouble brewed, and in surprising numbers.

Pitched forward on his face, with both legs torn away, the Emperor lay dying in the snowy streets of the beloved city his forebears built to give the tsars a window to the West. The alleys were eerily empty. The snow lay deep that year, and getting deeper.

"Home! Home!" the wounded emperor cried out and, perforated like a sieve by treachery, he sighed, and that was that. Within a fortnight he was dead—another broken cog in the relentless wheels of history. He died a miserable death, but not before he said: "The devil is blacker than even we surmised. Even his eyes have an unnatural color."

It is said he repeated that twice, between clenched teeth, and time has not muffled that rumor.

Around his casket gathered many mourners. Chief among the grieving stood a timid, shaken child—a boy who often saw in his repeated nightmares as he grew up the bloody stumps where legs had been—those limbs the malcontents had shredded with the powder of the Fiend.

The rage and anguish of that day had never left his heart. Nor had his trepidation. It had happened before. It could happen again. "The seed of Abraham," he knew, "sprouts treachery."

He shared his ancient throne's conviction, accumulated over centuries.

His father, who took over, had been a cold, stern man, thickset, parochial to the core, with a loud voice and heavy lids. He rode his country as a foolish man might ride a donkey, facing tailward. The bands around his heart were forged of haughtiness. His servants hunted through the streets in search of the yarmulkes, driving out treason with blows of their fists.

"The Jews are burrowing like moles," he told his son, before he closed his eyes, preparing for eternity. "You must keep them in check."

That was the legacy.

And it was not just Russia. For centuries, all Europe had been full of hatred toward Jews. All thrones detested Jews and kept them far away—except to borrow money.

The Jews tried stealth—no matter. They tried to sneeze quietly—no matter.

"One thought," the monarchies maintained down ages, making sure they passed the message on, from throne to throne, from year to year, "is on the Jewish mind, and that is world control."

The New World Order? Listen. Much older than Methuselah.

When the young Emperor took over the throne, he knew his absolutes: the power of religion rested upon Faith; so, too, the power, might and glory of the Romanovs.

That was the only way.

False friends would urge him, now and then, to open up the prisons of the tsars to let fresh air blow in. In the meantime, for diversion, he tended to his cucumbers, and took leisurely walks in the gardens.

His Cossacks kept crushing revolts. The culprits were sent to Siberia in a cascade of wails and complaints.

The ruling class kept seeking favors and walked away with blessings from the tsar. The peasants toiled to strengthen Mother Russia, whose heart was bleeding at the seams. The stern-faced ancestors in the imperial frames looked on.

"You can't catch birds in flight," a kinky-headed lad said angrily to Uncle Benny, who often rounded out his idle days by visiting the city of the tsars.

"One can, however, try?" suggested Uncle Benny.

The latter was more learned than the former, who was a youngster still, not more than twenty years of age, while Uncle Benny had white hair.

Each produced his note pad to compare. Both felt abiding reverence for ink.

They had no quarrel with the premise: that all should live in brotherhood. They strongly disagreed on this: how brotherhood

would come about, when feelings cleaved so deeply between the landed gentry and the poor.

"On one hand, too much wealth, by far," the publisher of Apanlee allowed. "Appalling squalor, poverty, diseases on the other."

"I grant you that. That's not the argument."

"I know. The argument is this: what's fair? You don't breed strength in wooden hovels."

"The people are hungry, illiterate, crafty and cruel."

"To keep them in check, you need more than an arrogant, untrammeled army."

"Gold nuggets in your wagon beds, and silver weighing down your tables?"

"But earned by rightful means. By legal means. There must exist a path between extremes."

The youngster, full of fire: "Not for as long as every tsar believes he is anointed by the Lord. Not for as long as tsars keep telling every bureaucrat: 'Tomorrow is another day.' Without an ax, you cannot chop up wood. Without a match, you cannot light a fire."

"May God forbid! The devil will insert his page, and what will happen then—"

They nodded wisely to each other. They bantered back and forth. The tea house where they sat was clean, well-lit, and warm, but in the streets the icy wind blew horizontally.

"My people never beat their servants," said Uncle Benny gently. "They seldom even scold them. They're just. They're honest and straightforward. They do expect, however, that work be done on time. They do demand that sheaves be bound and streets be swept and rakes and forks be stored in an orderly fashion after the day's work is done."

"So what? What does that mean? Black bread is for the workers. Zwieback is for the rich."

The Revolutionary's face was flaming, filled with impatient anger. "Find me the man," the youth said stormily, "who owns two horses and would surrender one. It simply will not happen."

"My people are convinced they have a covenant—"

"A God who speaks High German?"

"Their ethnic roots have been entwined into a dozen knots with every reigning monarch."

The insurrectionist spoke sharply. "No way to carry out reform without cutting through quivering tissue and spilling a great deal of blood."

"See that old woman over there? See how she sells her doves?"

"All afternoon, I've had my eyes on her. She sits there on her wind-blown corner, hoping against hope that no one will chase her away before she has sold enough birds. Five birds still to sell. The day all but gone." The youth blew circles of blue smoke. "Is hers a life worth living? I know her very well. Each morning, long before the sun comes up, her husband wakes her with a kick. Six children have been born to her; and all of them are dead."

"It's sad. I grant you that. It's sad."

"So millions live and die within appalling poverty and never know their lives might have been different. Will she revolt? Not she."

"Watch me." Uncle Benny hunted in his pockets for some kopecks. He rose and limped across the street to where the woman sat. The youthful radical, while sipping vodka, watched the transaction silently.

The woman narrowed her old eyes. "You want a bird? You need a bird? Which one?"

"That one," said Uncle Benny. "The one with the white, fluffy feathers."

The old woman threw open the cage. "Quick! Grab it! Here! Here's a piece of string."

"I need no string. I want to give it freedom."

"Wastrel! Wastrel!" shrieked the woman. She started cuffing Uncle Benny, pouring forth abuse. The pigeon, unaccustomed to its wings, fluttered clumsily across the street, and settled on a dirty cobblestone. It kept on tipping over, pitching forward fi-

nally, first on its beak, then straight into the gutter.

"See what you did? See what you did?" shrieked the street vendor woman. "Why waste a bird? Why waste a bird for nothing?"

With gentle hands, Uncle Benny lifted the pigeon away from the swirl of the sewer and returned it to its cage. "Just keep the kopecks. Here."

A smile broke out across her face. She grinned at him, still half-bewildered and suspicious. "Why waste a bird," she echoed, still perplexed, and slammed the cage for emphasis. "For nothing?"

# Chapter 30

Jan thrust Josie into motherhood before she had a chance to savor her virginity and safeguard it as long as possible—the glee of any girl. Their first child was a boy. As all the neighbors had predicted, his birthdate fell into the margin between significance and doubt.

This baby was her heartache from the start. As a toddler, as a kindergartner, the child stayed pale, his fingernails blue, a shy and wispy thing, afflicted with a clumsy tongue. This caused some savage teasings and many speculations.

In fact, some people went so far as to suggest: hardly a boy at all.

When Josie heard that , she picked up a broom and flailed at the chickens like mad.

Little Melly, her virtue still blindingly white, was loath to cease her mischief. She put out lots of double tongues insinuating this and that, but Josie, rising from her first confinement on a pair of wobbly knees but sharp stiletto words, let it be known: She had a baby now. What matter the hard stares?

She took the infant everywhere. She woke herself up with

her nightmares. The little boy was there to stay; in fact, he weaned without a hitch, and even though the boundaries between suspense and certainty were dim, the drone of gossip lessened.

Thanks to a thousand lucky stars, in time he started gaining weight, and Josie, never dull for long, decided to stare back. She never toadied. Never.

"So this is motherhood," said Josie to herself.

Her girlish looks returned; she didn't put on curves; and it was difficult to tell if wedded life agreed with her or not. Wherever Josie went, the baby went as well, but even so, she seemed to all a doubtful, mystifying parent. When the triumphant midwife handed her that firstling, she looked perplexed and baffled.

For weeks after the baby's birth, she slept and slept and slept. She was asleep when Little Melly came tiptoeing into her kitchen to start the yeast for her.

Jan was the first in Mennotown to put in indoor plumbing, but Josie let the faucet drip. She misplaced Jan's best socks; she muttered that she hated liverwurst; she argued that a misty moon caused melancholy and vice versa, and once she even said, regarding Abigail: "She is my one and only friend."

Such things went on for years. Such talk brought dismay to her household.

Lizzy paced the floor and wrung her hands; but Josie sat on the hard kitchen chair or swayed on the balls of her feet, refusing to conform. She once forgot to put away a shovel, and Little Melly stumbled over it and took a serious tumble. Lizzy buried her face in the folds of her apron with shame.

Born out of time and out of place, that was Jan's Josephine. Words came in a furious torrent. Offers to baptize her were in vain. Sermons only brought on hives.

"How does it look, I ask you?" pleaded Lizzy. "Sunday comes, and Sunday goes, and your place in the pew remains empty."

"So?"

"You owe your standing in our villege to your marriage. You must give something back."

"I am still puzzling that one out," said Josie, her eyes two blinded windows.

She took on one of her many disguises. She held her husband in the hollow of her hand; she had a fine time with his money.

It soon came to the fore that the root of all that friction and discord were the opaque and murky Finkelsteins, to whom Josie had taken a shine. Either she liked folks or not, and she liked them. A lot. She lifted her chin, stuck out her tongue, and insisted they were human beings.

When she returned from Wichita, where she would often go—sometimes alone, sometimes alongside Doctorjay, sometimes with Abigail in tow—her eyes still shone like two candles.

From early on, far into old age, there were swarms of Jews about Josie.

Whereas the Donoghues were everywhere, snapping fingers to each other—which could mean anything!—the Finkelsteins were shadowy. Many whispers raced about their odd political connections. When she came back from Wichita, her cheeks were ablaze with excitement. Filled with modernity, she sometimes had the neighborhood in stitches, and often in revolt. The deacons said disaster lurked around the corner, for even then she took to hard ideas like a man. She claimed that Finkelstein ideas made her blood sing and her emotions soar, just like a meadow lark.

Jan sometimes chided Josie, with gentle words and many sighs, but often he did not, for just as soon as he would try to make it clear to her that she should change her ways—that here, in Mennotown, she was an oddity—she'd cut him off:

"I know. I know. They all mean well. The family is friendly."

In the end, Lizzy caught Jan by his sleeve and hissed that she wanted to see him alone. Nobody could blame Lizzy, who might have led a life of leisure, doing little more than darning socks and teaching proper smocking, instead of lowering the beam of recti-

tude on Jan's young, foolish wife: "When is enough enough?"

Jan's marriage was her cross to bear. Her rocking chair had many cushions, constantly alternated in her woe. Her words came from the heart.

"Jan, be on guard. What is it Josie does in Wichita?"

"She's engaged in enlarging her mind."

"What? How? By getting together with strangers? I'm warning you. There's trouble on the way."

"She says it makes no difference. She claims her name is mud already."

"What's going on with her and Abigail?"

"They study sheet music together."

It was all a bottomless pit. She, Lizzy, kept on rocking, swallowing her tears. She knew in a vague way: it had to do with yearning for a knowledge with no name, or boundaries, or borders. It would become catastrophe. What did the Bible say? Eve was allowed to eat whatever fruit from any tree that grew in the Garden of Eden—except for the tree that grew knowledge.

"You carry that old grudge," said Josie in the end. "He married me. Not her."

Lizzy pressed her lips together and took her time replying, for bearing grudges was most decidedly not a part of Lizzy's arsenal.

"A grudge? What grudge? I don't bear grudges. How can you say that, Josie?"

"I'm smarter. And prettier. And younger."

If these ordeals vexed Josephine, if they caused shame to Lizzy, they did not trouble Jan; he smiled at hearing that his wife forgot to burp the baby; he laughed out loud when he was told that Josie sliced her thumb instead of a cucumber.

"Enjoy yourself as much as possible," he told her many times. He lost his wits to love. His anguish, born of folly, was beginning.

He said it once, he said it many times: "All that she wants, is hers to have. All that is mine to give, is Josie's."

He kept on spoiling her. He kept on pleasing her. He overlooked the Finkelsteins.

"By nightfall, I am always back," claimed Josephine.

When people murmured of the Finkelsteins and what their goals might be, Jan said he trusted Josie. Asked why, he told them rather sharply: "Quite simply—she gave me her word. She is incapable of falsehood."

Pie in the sky, was the verdict. Jan never lost his patience with her foibles.

Josie was his darling baby bride; she was near perfect in his eyes; she bore him the desired son; he tickled both; he searched for their dimples and found them. The first one wasn't even potty trained when she was blossoming again.

Josie had her children with great regularity, each one of them a female—save that first boy, born with a faulty tongue.

Alissa was born. Milly came next. Just as Jan's barns were swelling with wheat bumper crops, so Josie kept swelling with babies. In quick succession next came Tammy, then Betsy and, in the end, Fran. The latter three were born in Wichita, inside a ten-bed hospital, and Josie wore a purple gown that had a tasseled rim.

Her firstling kept on struggling with his tongue. But not until her last—that special child with magic fingers—did Josie savor motherhood.

The family needed more room at the table. Jan planted additional crops.

Each pregnancy deepened a sorrow. Each birth throttled something sharp and vivid within Josie. From baby to baby, she tossed dream after dream to the winds.

Between babies, her stomach was flat, her skin brown and hard. No sooner did another life begin to throb beneath her ruffled skirt than her skin turned gray and mottled; her moods grew dark as night.

"I might as well be one of Lizzy's cows," she once told

Doctorjay. She spoke with a small quaver in her voice. The evening was quiet. A solitary cricket chirped somewhere.

She sat beneath the apple tree, beside the wobbly bridge, from which rich, fertile soil sloped, even, to the river. Trapped once again in motherhood, she waited out her time.

Never one to live her life by halves, Josie signed up for the circulating library; it made the rounds two times a year, in May and in November. May was a busy month, but by November life was quiet; the snow lay deep and covered all the stubble.

The days were bleak. The trees had lost their leaves. The winter storms swept, howlingly, across the frozen Kansas earth, but Josie, by the fire, started glowing.

Those were mysterious times for Josephine.

For weeks on end, before the book cart came, she scoured madly through her kitchen to keep her pots all sweet and clean so Lizzy could not use her undone chores as reason to disturb her solitude and keep her from her reading.

She loved to read at any hour of the day; she curled up beside the the fireplace and was lost to the world and its duties.

"Print is my magic potion," she said to Jan, but of its powers, of the euphoria that came with poignant print, her husband did not have a clue.

He liked to startle her when she sat reading by the fire. He knew she had a way of listening to her surroundings as though she had a butterfly's probes, but he outsmarted her; he played small pranks on her; no matter how his little Josie-girl pricked up her rosy ears, snow deadened roughish noises.

She would plead, anguished: "Please! Don't do that, Jan! I don't like being spooked."

He paid no heed to that. He loved to outwit her. He made sure that she did not hear a sound until he stood behind her suddenly to petrify her with his booming voice and make her drop her book.

"Now, there's a man for you," said Noralee to Doctorjay.

So full of strength and energy was Jan that, every night, when all the work was done, he'd flex his hardened muscles and run three times the length of Mennotown to work off excess spirit.

Doctorjay cast a shrewd glance at Noralee. "What do you mean? What are you saying, woman?"

"Oh, nothing. Nothing. Not a thing."

"Out with the truth."

"Just wondering. That's all."

"Look. Heaven has endowed her with some pretty special gifts," said Doctorjay aggressively, as ever fond of Josie.

"Then why only females?" she wanted to know, her brows arching coyly to drive home her question.

"It's nature's way, I guess."

"By contrast, look at you and me. Is that prosperity, or what?"

Each year made Doctorjay more prosperous. Sometimes he took the teeth he pulled to Wichita to showcase wealth and glory in his status. When Josie took up stenciling and made a sign for him that said he no longer took Sunday appointments, he knew that he'd arrived.

"So. What is new across the violent waters?" he asked, while watching Josephine do final touches with her brush.

"The masses growl, it seems."

He pondered this at length. "The old country always had its share of malcontents."

"Yes. Here as there. The furrows, full of worms. The sparrows scoop them up."

He felt a burning admiration for anybody who could read and write, and Josie did both, like a professor. When she read Uncle Benny's words, she looked as though she were absorbed with beating back an ocean. When she wrote back to Russia, she ornamented every page.

He watched while she worked, absorbed in her task. "And you? Are you growing a little more tranquil?"

She understood at once. She told him in a low and trembling voice while kicking at a rock: "The rumors fly. Right? And isn't

that the truth!"

"The rumors fly."

"The rumors have it wrong. One man is quite enough."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure. Am I the kind that lies?"

"What is it, honey? Tell me."

"I can't."

"One day, it was just me and Abigail out in the fields and not a soul in sight—well, never mind! Believe me, child, I looked her over with great interest. I tried and couldn't either. It's you and Jan. It's me and my old Noralee. That's our universe."

"So, let's just drop it. Shall we?" Her hands were resting in her lap. At last, she spoke. Her voice was low.

"You couldn't be more wrong."

She watched the sun drop into the grain and gave herself over to sadness. The evening was very quiet. Young trees were shooting up across the prairie. She wore a cotton frock, made from a flour sack, cut wide enough around her waist.

He finally said this: "Well, let me tell you what to eat, what not to eat. For breakfast, oatmeal with bacon. For lunch *vareniki* with sour cream. For dinner, bread and *griebenschmalz*. And right before you go to bed, a hard-boiled egg with milk."

"I know. You've told me twenty times already."

"Put garlic in your milk. It's good for your teeth and your gums."

"I hate garlic. You know I hate garlic."

"If you don't watch it, Josie, you'll lose your teeth. You still have pretty teeth. Now let me see. Give me a smile. Give me your prettiest smile."

He saw her trembling lip. He winked at her and tried to humor her. He left her sitting there.

"I'll watch her like the apple of my eye," said Doctorjay to Jan, when he took Josie visiting to Wichita. "I'll watch her carefully. You don't mind? Do you?"

"No. Not at all. Just take her. Squire her around. And bring

her back at night."

"I will."

"She never tires of the world that isn't our world," said Jan.

It went without saying that seldom, if ever, did Jan lose patience or control, not even when his wife was quarrelsome beyond the boundaries of any rhyme or reason, not even when she said with gritted teeth while crushing a small cricket with her heel and biting off each word:

"Jan. Please. Please don't talk down to me! Please don't!"

"I didn't know I did."

Her words were as bitter as quinine. "Come spring, there's Caroline, and there goes Josephine, both calving by the calendar."

Jan longed for a second son to help him with the harvests, but Josie kept on birthing girls, ignoring his wishes. She fitted them with paper curls. She kept them all in frills and sashes.

Although her pregnancies were difficult, what counted was: she had wide hips. She had her children with great ease, thus thwarting expectations.

Armed with a ruler, abacus and triangle, Jan went to work to better his town. For month after months, he sat hunched over blueprints, telling the city fathers in the end:

"A larger grammar school. A teacher's college. A picnic park. A modern firehouse."

By then, Jan was by wide acclaim the most esteemed and valued citizen of Mennotown. The village still consisted of one road, but that would change; the town folks said of Jan: "The motorcar is here, and look at Jan! His eye is on a flivver."

The wanton killing of McKinley had pushed Jan's modernizing plans for his community off the front page of the *Wichita Eagle*, but shortly afterward there was a two-page spread that told of Jan's enormous pledge to help expand the church.

One sunny Sunday morning, Jan told his wife: "I feel so grateful for my bounty. I must give something back."

"As if you don't."

"I do. Yet something deep within feels hollow."

"Why, Jan?" she asked, her tongue on the trigger of questions. She shooed a fly from the cheese.

"Why what?"

"Why do you feel that Dewey needs your money? Why don't you take him at his word? The Lord will provide. The Lord always does."

"Don't talk like that. It's not becoming, Josie."

"Well, I don't chew my cud."

"My Faith tells me I must."

"What? Chew your cud?"

"Don't twist my words. You know what I'm saying. You know exactly what I mean. Here's what I mean: my Faith feels like a blanket. It is my heirloom, Josie. It gives me warmth. It gives me peace. I want to frame it properly."

"You must be chill."

Jan could never be angry for long. "And you? Right now you're boiling just beneath your collar," he said with a small laugh.

"Well, practice makes perfect, as Dewey would say."

"There's enough to go around. Let's share our wealth. Let's do it for harmony's sake."

"I feel harmonious. The only thing that gives me hives is Dewey's oily voice."

Jan, awkward with longing, replied: "A life without my church would be as difficult for me as walking with two fallen arches. I'd only like for you to understand. I ask your understanding."

"I continue to blacken your reputation," said Josie, hot from Wichita.

"That isn't it at all."

"Well, then?" She suddenly leaned forward. It was as if she held her breath.

"It's hard to explain," he said slowly. "These days, new prairie towns come cheap. The prairie is astir with growth. All kinds of people come to stay. They aren't us. They're different. Just look at Wichita. It is already straining at the seams. Before too

many years are gone, it will be difficult to keep our children from dispersing. They'll want to leave. They will be lured by snare and bait into the shallow waters of modernity. I want them to have roots."

"They have roots aplenty, But where are the leaves?"

"I want them to have soil. And Mennotown is special. There's nothing like it, Josie. This is God's town, God's country. I'd like to keep it that way."

"Sure. Just as soon as that slimer comes jingling—"

"Dewey does wonderful things for the downtrodden, Josie. He needs a larger church. It's proper, Josie. That's the reason."

"He has his fingers in your pocket. And that's where they will stay."

"We do not hurt. The Lord has blessed us lavishly. There is enough for everyone. For him. For you. For our family. For future generations."

"Why is he not accountable for anything he takes from you, yet I must always ask?"

" The wishbook is yours for the asking."

"You always say that I'm a spendthrift. You say that, and you laugh. In Mennotown, that's not a joke. It isn't very funny. Yet when Dewey shows up, hat in hand, you fork over your nickels like hay."

"I don't give anything against my will. It's my church. I built it. I run it. I cherish it. I honor it. It guides me, and it comforts me. How to explain a rainbow to the blind? My church—"

"I have sharp eyes."

"—my church is me. It married me. One day, that church will bury me. That thought gives me great peace."

"Go on."

He gently stroked her tresses. "It makes me feel good. It makes me feel clean. It makes me feel as though I'm running a comb through my hair when I give to the church of my choice. It makes me feel orderly. Proper."

"Worthwhile?"

"Worthwhile. That's the word. That's what I was struggling to say. I feel worthwhile. That's what my church gives me. I stand where I'm supposed to be. That's what my tithing does to me. Dear child, if only you would see—"

"Don't call me child. I've never been a child."

"I want to make up for your childhood, Josie."

"My childhood," Josie said, and there was ice in her blue eyes, "was snuffed out by my father's pious knuckles."

# Chapter 31

Dewey's flock increased in numbers as if the Methodists were merely chaff instead of a prodigious nuisance who tried to cut repeatedly into his donation roster, as Little Melly pointed out, she having herself a much-respected influence in matters of the church.

Little Melly, a fervent born-again, felt sorry for those who were not. She was up to the Methodists' shenanigans—they hogged her favorite corner at the fair. She waged an unrelenting war on every Unitarian—they tapped their toes while singing. As for the stiff Episcopalians—she fought their dogma savagely.

Propelled on by the Holy Ghost, she also lit into the libertines. They all seemed to have either colors, flowers, grass or precious metals in their names.

At every opportunity, she squared off with the suffragettes as well, and with good cause—she had strong premonitions, for Josie still half-milked her cows, her mind on something else. Jan's Josie was still blown about by every wind and many an idea.

On Sundays she and Abigail would often disappear; you

wondered where; they didn't say; the neighborhood said spiteful things about them.

"Where to?" asked Little Melly many times, and Josie frowned and shrugged. The summer sun was making flashes in her hair. She had come face to face with Wichita, and that is where she went.

She did so every Sunday afternoon—this long before the nickelodeons arrived. To free herself, she cooked her meals on Saturdays. She acquired three fanciful hats—contraptions as big as the moon, and with streamers. She was bursting with city ideas.

Dewey strove with all his might to turn the tide against modernity. In recognition of his struggle, he was feted from homestead to homestead. His reputation grew by leaps and bounds. He put a part of his abundant energy into nailing down some solid and convincing rules, to wit:

No books that made your heart pound with forbidden longing.

No friendships that the church did not approve.

No songs that smacked of tempo.

No card play. And no dominoes.

Dewey took his mission gravely. He had a pat routine that helped him convert sinners by the score. First he blasted them with fire, then he baptized them with water, and those who didn't dive for cover found true salvation in the Lord.

His pants were too short, his sermons too long, but heaven and hell he precisely defined. The net result was an expanded congregation.

"A masterful sermon, that's all that it takes," was Dewey's firm belief. Not counting Josephine, in Mennotown and its surroundings, the Donoghues were just about the only ones who still remained ungospeled and unchurched.

"What will she think of next?" fussed Lizzy many times, with no doubt left that Josie fancied Finkelstein ideas.

She said so openly. Her parasol was making small dents in the sand. You only had to follow them; you knew which way she headed—down to the Hebrew stores.

"Bust cream, no doubt," predicted Little Melly.

"No!" Lizzy squealed as though she had been stuck with a sharp darning needle. "That's where Jan draws the line."

"You must give him a hint."

There was no time to spare. In every matter moral, Little Melly was her brother's pal. She was in full accord with his philosophy. The disappointment of her youth had made her strong in certitude and filled her with crusading zeal. She had her work cut out.

Now that the Holy Ghost propelled her on, she helped her brother strip away parishioners' transgressions like leaves from the branches of trees.

"I couldn't do without you," said Dewey often, gratefully, acknowledging her skills.

Chit-chatting was her specialty. Just as the raindrops kept the dust from flying, so did her salient gossip keep newfangled novelties in check. It kept his flock from dancing to the tunes of dangerous modernity. No rouge. No see-through sleeves. No ornamental buttons. No flowered drapes on parlor windows. No chrome base bedroom lamps from Sears—such as she spied from the corner of her eye when she sailed by Jan's home.

In the beginning, Dewey and Daisy tried farming on the choice strip of land that Jan had purchased cleverly and set aside as dowry for his sister when Daisy still was small.

"It lies right in the path of progress," Jan said to Daisy lovingly. He was a real patriarch that way—protective of his siblings.

When Jan deeded his land to his sister, he had hoped that one day she and her husband would build there. But that was not to be.

"The railroad has a right-of-way," said Dewey, thoughtfully. "If we sell now, that parcel ought to bring a hefty chunk of cash.

What do you think? We could renew the pews—"

Daisy rocked on peacefully, in front of her a mug. "If you say so. I'm sure that you know best." A cat was purring at her feet. She did not stress herself with matters none of which were women's business: her mind was on red cabbage.

He nodded to himself, immersed in calculations. It was a lovely plot of land; it had nine ancient oak trees growing quietly, and a creek. A brisk breeze blew there in the morning. Across it ran a one-lane dirt trail leading to a bridge where sparrows perched.

That bridge worried Jan; it was narrow and brittle and needed support. Unless the railing was reinforced, and soon, an accident was bound to happen. Jan planned to do the work, but not before convincing City Hall—where bureaucrats and planners talked of widening the roadway. But Josie said, please don't! "It's so romantic there," said Josie, dreamily, and started glowing softly with a forbidden thought.

Once traffic came and ruined the solitude, said Josie, lost in fantasy, it wouldn't be the same.

She didn't say it right out loud, but everybody knew: that's where she went for privacy. That's where she sat, for hours on end, and waited for her mail.

By then, she had lured Doctorjay into her camp. He played into her schemes. He'd meet with Josie, by the brook, down by the wobbly bridge, and hand her this and that.

She needed allies; he, alibis. Those two were mighty cozy with each other. When Doctorjay was done with doctoring and ambling home at leisure on his mare, Annetta, he often stopped the mailman coming out of Wichita to take the bags from him and save him a detour.

Mail always came on Fridays. Friday afternoon was it!

The healer always treated Josephine with courtesy; he didn't punish her with silences when she had overstepped a line. He always spoke to her; he tipped his hat to her. She shone her smiles on him. She was his friend. He was her confidant.

He stood behind her with excuses when she kept birthing girls while Jan was hoping for a second son to carry the family name.

Doctorjay found a champion in Josie. In him, she found a lifelong friend. They kept confiding little secrets to each other. Some people wondered if they had to do with Abigail. He had his eye on Abigail who was a female, by that time, who could best be described with the palms of two hands; that's how he outlined her to Josie.

The two, so different as a rule, were full of mischief when together. The thought of Little Melly, lying in her narrow bed, between her spotless sheets, thinking up assorted schemes to trap them, would render them helpless with giggles.

She backed him up in all his fast and furious stories. She furnished proof that he had spent all night awaiting a delinquent calf's arrival, when, it was later learned, Doctorjay, quite overcome with the felicity of yet another holiday and yet another joyous crowd, had snoozed the night away in Lizzy's cozy barn.

"What do I owe you, Doctorjay?" Josie slid another missive in her neckline.

"Oh, nothing. Nothing. Nothing but your thanks."

"These letters. From another planet," marveled Josie.

He fixed shrewd eyes on her. "I'm glad to be of service."

"You are."

"Out with the truth. It's not the artist? Is it?"

"No. He is just a friend. Don't laugh, but it is mostly Uncle Benny. The fancy of his thoughts!"

That was enough for him. He knew she never lied. She hadn't had the time to be a young and carefree girl, so now she fantasized.

He saw she was no longer sick with emptiness and longing; she was a young and eager girl who waited for surprises. These *tete-a-tetes* down by the bridge, where the meadows lay dappled with daisies, were like a secret pact, although the healer never found out what it was that etched its magic into Josie's heart as though with a sharp diamond.

She smiled. She wouldn't say.

"Giddap, Annetta!" shouted Doctorjay to whom most secrets of the heart were altogether plain. When he appeared and waved another letter, Jan's Josie was beside herself; the bridge would wobble with her joy so that he thought it might collapse from the excitement of a thought that differed from the thoughts of Mennotown. She was the captive of her whimsies and fancies.

Each Friday afternoon she carried on where she left off the week before— and often she would get so feverish that Lizzy had to dip a towel in cold water and lay it on her head, to cool an overheated thought.

Of all her oddities, this was the strangest—her inexplicable affinity for cabalistic Uncle Benny. They carried on a lively correspondence. He wrote to her routinely. She wrote him back at once.

When Uncle Benny visited that way, she shimmered, and she shone. When letters came from Russia, it was as though a window to a gilded palace opened up for just a tiny crack, as though a ray of sunshine briefly caught itself, reflected by a broken piece of glass. Each time it was as if she had received a greeting from a lover, instead of just the half-forgotten invalid of Apanlee.

"He never scolds me. Never!" she said to Doctorjay.

By then, the bonesetter had his own woes; he drank to every holiday. He drank to friendship, peace and understanding. He toasted the Spanish-American War, the death of Queen Victoria, the first of the two meddling Roosevelts—and one long Sunday afternoon that stretched and stretched with nothing else to do, he went so far as toasting Darwin's Theory of Evolution.

"You're heading straight for dipsomania," shrieked Noralee, so mad at him she threw a pail of water at the cat. "The Moabites and Stalactites—"

"She means Amalekites," said Josephine who was the kind, by then, who saw a piece of paper blowing down the street, ran after it, and read it.

The healer hiccuped gently. "Who're they?"

"Don't even ask. Believe me, Doctorjay! They're worse."

"I'll drink to that," said he.

If Josie knew that Doctorjay drank more than might be good for him, she certainly never let on. The bottom line was this: those two worked hand in hand.

The Kansas blizzard winds blew hard. The fire water warmed.

When he felt fortified that way, all chilly on the outside, all mushy on the inside, he knew he could outlast most any crisis, malady or woe.

He introduced her to assorted strangers he met on various detours in Wichita, for Josie needed all the friends and friendships she could get.

She knew where his bottle was hidden. She knew, but didn't tell.

Sly secrets passed between them from the start.

She understood why he felt naked without handshakes. When he passed by her home, she'd coax him inside, plunk him down, right in the middle of her couch, hand him a steaming cup of coffee, then patiently watch over him until he could steady his limbs, quiet his tongue, and properly focus his eyes.

"Time just flew by," he would explain to Noralee when he was late again.

She tried to worm out details. Log rolling would have been easier!

Much as Doctorjay admired and appreciated Josie, there was a complication. She was a woman, with a woman's reluctance to drink. As do all drunks, he itched to fraternize. He craved a bosom buddy to lean against when the trees began to sway.

Among the folks in Mennotown, that was no small objective, not even for a Lutheran as sly as Doctorjay.

He tried to stake out Jan.

"Jan, join me. For the heck of it. No one will ever know."

"No. Thank you, Doctorjay. Some other time, perhaps."

"Just once?"

"No. Thank you just the same."

"Here! Let's sit behind that bush and have ourselves a little something for the bladder."

Quite a few bets were riding on the outcome. The healer had persistence. Jan, for his part, had strength. Conviction. Moral certitude.

But Doctorjay had cunning, in addition. Come yet another holiday, he planned another ambush. "What's just one little tumbler?"

Jan wouldn't hear of it. He would no more have downed a drop of fire water than a lion eaten lettuce, even once. Jan said, with a small shudder: "Remember the pliers? Are you fooling, or what, Doctorjay?"

"All right! If not, then not. Perhaps another time? *Pascholl*, Annetta! Oops! Giddap!"

He clutched the mare's gray neck. He prized the old horse dearly. All through Sedgwick County, most knew her name; most, what she ate. To him, she passed for human. On slow days, he gravely studied her tongue.

Who would have guessed the time would come when Doctorjay would trade Annetta for a flivver?

Because the healer valued Josie, he never told her that he knew why she was sore in every cell of her young life about her offspring's stuttering.

The neighbors knew. The neighbors' stares could make her wince as though she bit a cherry pit into a tooth that had a hidden cavity.

She trembled for her son. She was in a cold sweat.

Her terror even made her tumble out of bed—the night he caught diphtheria and almost choked to death. His throat needed soothing a lot.

We speak now of the margin child, just old enough to go to grammar school, but still blue-veined and timid. The youngster did not in the least resemble Jan, whose voice could shake the rafters.

He was a gentle child; his sisters were robust.

The teacher tied his favored hand, his left, behind his back: in consequence, his p's and t's came in volleys.

It was too much for Josie. She became like a woman possessed.

Come rain or snow, she sent her son to Wichita to have his speech repaired. "You're as good, if not better, than the rest," she told him, and never mind the weather.

The little fellow stooped against the winter wind. Lizzy's heart broke when she saw him standing there, alone, out by the road, a little boy in great, big mittens. Her eyes fogged up with pity, her window fogged up with her breath.

Lizzy tried to think up innovative ways to sabotage the elocution lessons. It was decidedly unwise to make a simple handicap a lifelong liability by fussing over it, yet that's what Josie did. By then, she stood at odds with God, for it was clear to all that only He Who put the burden on this child could likewise take it away. If He did not—and there was little indication that He might—then that could only mean that Josie had not learned her lesson.

But Josie would have none of that philosophy. She would improve the stutterer. She was determined to unfurl her small son's twisted tongue.

She made no secret of the fact that she was visiting the Finkelsteins from time to time who plied her with their theories. "They're just folks," was her refrain. "Like anybody else."

That's what she said when asked. More than that she wouldn't share, even to their questions.

Such as: why did they celebrate their Sundays Saturdays?

Why did they mutilate their boys by snipping at their privates, in caftan and black hat?

Why did they all go fishing for a bargain, some sooner and some later?

Dead or alive, a Jew was still a Jew. Unless your name was Josephine, you stood aloof. Apart.

For years, the age-old evangelical concerns about the usurers the elders fussed about were of no interest to Josie. She sought the Hebrews out to elevate her thoughts, soak up sophistication.

Next, on a whim, she took up bicycling.

"I need a bit of exercise," she said, when Dewey Epp came calling to bring the latest on the Gospel, a tipsy Doctorjay in tow, atop his bicycle, followed by three dogs.

"No, Josie! No!"

"Try racing me!"

While the others looked for chairs on which to settle down for an extended chat, Josie did the ultimate, the absolutely scandalous: she hoisted up her hem—one foot above her ankle—climbed up on Doctorjay's contraption that he had leaned with care against the chicken house, and started weaving down the lane.

"Much better than a skittish horse," cried Josephine, and off she rode, down the leaf-strewn sidewalk. In fact, before her husband had a chance to grab her by her skirt, she wobbled clear across the length of Mennotown.

The healer shouted after her: "Look at her! Watch her go! Yippee!" yelled Doctorjay, and slapped his thigh with gusto.

"You are an oaf," hissed Noralee, and elbowed Doctorjay to stop, but he was in a merry mood that day and wouldn't be denied.

Little Melly could no longer withhold her opinion. She told Lizzy, eyebrows raised, with a small, mocking smile: "She will yet drive Jan to drink or suicide—" but that day, Lizzy snapped: "Now, Little Melly! Hear! That is your last drop of venom!"

Ever after, Little Melly tried to keep her tongue in check, but did not close her ears.

Dewey cornered the Council of Elders. He talked to them at length and gave them firm instructions.

They took his message back to Jan: "It's all your fault. You fan the spark of mutiny. You laugh when you should scold." All that was public knowledge.

Jan shook his head, as much in love as ever.

"She still is young. She'll change. She has always been partial to strangers."

The Elders spoke dire warnings. "She will destroy your Faith."

Jan smiled and leaned back in his favorite chair. He spoke with assurance and measure.

"She's fence-straddling now, and struggling and searching. I don't want to give her a lasting dislike for the Gospel by forcing its teachings too soon."

The Elders repeated their warnings, picked up their hats and nodded their omens, departing, but not before glooming and dooming: "We've looked into this Hebrew business, and cannot see the bottom."

Jan stared after them, at a loss as to how to reply.

It was the age-old argument. Not even the tsar wanted Jews in the army. Even the tsars had police on their heels.

As Jan watched Josephine throughout the years as she kept up her dalliance with the Solomons and Finkelsteins, her quiver always full of arrows, the needle of Jan's conscience jumped with ever greater frequency, as though it were a flea.

Old and young relied on Doctorjay and on his stomach bitters, and when it seemed that Josie went from bad to worse in every respect, Noralee officially dispatched her man to see if he could make a difference.

That day the healer said to Josephine: "Too many eyes are watching you. Why, just last week someone saw you in the branches of an apple tree."

"So? It's just my children's tree house."

"What were you doing there?"

"Who told you? Noralee?"

"She heard it from Betty, who heard it from Nan, who heard it from Susie and Kathy. Slow down a bit. What are you? A peacock? You are spreading your feathers just as wide as you possibly can."

"I only wanted privacy. I have no privacy. I was hiding away

in that tree house."

"You. A grown woman."

"I was reading a book. I couldn't put it down, and Lizzy, Noralee, and Little Melly—oh, never mind! Just never mind! They have only themselves to blame for their own cheerless lives. That's what I always say."

"I'm here to help. Whenever you need me."

She gave him a small pat. "I'll remember. Thank you." A book in hand, she was lost to the world and its duties.

"You aren't mad at me, are you?"

"Of course not. You're my friend." She liked him well enough. Regardless of the weather, the season, the time of day or night, you could depend on Doctorjay, whatever the emergency, to be there, at your side, a looming, helpful shadow.

You told him where it hurt. He found a remedy.

When sudden illness struck or death came lurching down the chimney, he was there. He came to lance a boil, to watch the progress of a calf, to help the birth of yet another Donoghue. By contrast, the Wichita doctors were suspect.

He voiced a final thought: "Look. There's a middle way."

"They all follow each other like geese."

"And you are the anomaly?"

"That's right. What's this I heard about a garter snake you put in Little Melly's pocket?"

He took an extra swig and shouted for a handkerchief on which to blow his nose. She had him there. He moved his hairy toes.

"Are these the thanks I get for all my pains?"

By then, his drinking habit had cauterized his stomach. He was welded to his flask; he couldn't do without. He drank outrageously. He quaffed to show his good will; he guzzled to display contempt. He was weaving from picnic to picnic.

When he was tipsy, he started to sing, urging others to join; when he was sloshed, he went so far as to embrace a Donoghue as though they were the best of friends. Drunk, he thought nothing of such aberrations.

# Chapter 32

Lizzy had long, lonely cries regarding ominous developments that cast their shadows over Jan's and Josie's marriage bed, now visibly neglected. She saw the writing on the wall; she was a mother, and a matriarch besides; Jan was the apple of her eye. While Jan was in the fields and needing every hand to keep the harvest going, his wife dressed up and went with Abigail to Wichita.

The two of them. Alone. Bedecked as for a gala.

They never walked the streets on foot, to window-shop; they always took the street car. Why? Just because. Because it made it harder to follow them that way.

Soon, other fearsome rumors coursed. It was a trying time for all, and worse was yet to come, for Josie did precisely as she pleased. Roughshod across tradition, that was her current route.

No hope in shocking her with threats of family rebuff!

Lizzy held her peace with grace; she had no other choice, but she did not lack eyes and ears. She couldn't help compare: poor Little Melly kept no secrets from her clan; she did not sport a

dresser without doilies nor spurn *vareniki*; nor did she sashay down each week to Wichita, a place as frightening as Babylon, a city thick with strangers.

In Mennotown that decade, the most important project was to build a bigger church to house the quickly growing, largely German congregation. Jan was picked to head the drive for funds, and he, in turn, enlisted Mennotown's Rotarians.

Becoming a Rotarian was now the ultimate, together with the flivver craze. "Males Only" was the rule. Not even Noralee was let inside to scrub the floor for fear she'd snoop too much and give away male secrets.

"Give me five years," swore Josie, whose specialty were boasts.

"Let's pull together in a common cause," Jan told the fellows, meanwhile, and there was loud applause. He knew the neighbors all approved; all offered to chip in. Jan was a wizard when it came to volunteers; he had a knack for marshaling a lot of willing hands as well as contributions.

Jan and a dozen newly sworn Rotarians stayed up until all hours while planning ways and means. A fine, long remembered meeting it was that ended with a generous gift: a paved parking lot behind the church, entirely at Jan's expense, along with a living allowance for Dewey.

"We cannot let the preacher starve," said Jan, and everybody cheered.

"Where will they live?" Josie wanted to know. A fine film of distaste came over Josie's feelings whenever she shook Dewey's hand. "If Dewey and Daisy decide not to farm, who'll support them in the years to come? You?"

In fact, that had been on Jan's mind. Dewey needed freedom from his daily toil—how else could he pursue his calling in the church?

"You gave Daisy her parcel. Why did she let him sell it? It was excellent soil. Just thirsting for the seed," Josie needled, inspecting a stain on her napkin. "Now he'll be on your pocket.

I thought I'd mention it."

Jan had no reply; there was nothing left to say. He knew she was right, and it rankled.

The townfolks built the preacher's home, replete with pantry and verandah. The project needed barrels full of money. Since Jan was rich in property, but often short on cash, Jan talked at length to several moneylenders, among them Josie's friends.

For several weekends in a row, the Finkelsteins sat snug in Josie's parlor and talked of this and that. Just dibs and dabs. Just stuff about the weather. Jan signed a lot of crackling papers. When Lizzy tried to peek, he shooed her from the door.

While construction still went on, the churchly couple took temporary residence in Lizzy's storage shed. Until the fathers of the church could get together on the books and finalize the enterprise, the place would have to do.

Things took a while; the harvest interfered. Meanwhile Little Melly, majestic in her morning robe, moved in with Lizzy, Jan and Josie.

"For just a month," said she, and stayed almost a year.

An aging spinster long before her time—fine wrinkles in a broad, round face, gray wisps about her temples—Little Melly gloried in the young fry that Dewey and Daisy produced, then handed over to her. Their children were as good as hers, and no one scorned her claim.

Some died in infancy and were efficiently forgotten, but those who lived stood out. Visit Mennotown today—you'll spot them instantly.

First, there's Arnold, well-renowned for his shrewd grocering: he lives a spicy life amid his onions, beets, squash, melons, radishes and mushrooms. Then there's Victor—still alive, but barely. And Douglas, who moved on to settle deep in the Nebraska plains where, to this day, his children and his children's children multiply and prosper.

His younger brother, Simon, is always in the public eye. He never traveled much past Wichita, but still his record shines. This

Simon is a small and simple man, a little daffy in the head, but a fine citizen. To this day, Simon is in charge of the Rotarian festivities in Mennotown, and it is Simon who, just recently, became a Harris Fellow—still in his flapping trousers.

Then there was Cornie, now forgotten, struck by lightning during haying. And Neta, Susie, Lisa. All three of them, when young, looked eagerly for energetic husbands, but only two succeeded. Murriel, pronounced Morell, did not. Her life's main purpose is to spread a lot of Christmas cheer at Christmas, which is what she is doing in Zaire.

All Epps go by two syllables. Except for one: his name is Archibald.

No nephew was nearer Little Melly than Archie. She raised him single-handedly. She spent a lifetime manning Archibald's exhibit booth at fairs to sell her cupcakes and her needlework that kept his Paraguayan leper mission going and helped the poor at home as well, especially the Donoghues.

Which brings us to the Donoghues. In Mennotown, the Donoghues are still regarded with suspicion. That they are loud and boisterous is known. Their backyard, just brambles and weeds. Today as in olden days, their fences are askew. Their windows still are stuffed with rags, their buttons held with wire. And everyone in Mennotown will tell you in detail that the productive land they tried to steal from Lizzy is nowhere near as fertile now as it was then, when Lizzy practiced fallowing. They still talk of the "missing" title that Lizzy must have laundered accidentally. The Donoghues have recently again! engaged a lawyer, a liberal lizard, doubtlessly, to check that old claim out.

"To this day, our grief goes on," the Mennotowners said to Erika who came to probe her roots.

"How so?"

"They say it was a lease and not a sale, no matter what the counterevidence."

The Donoghues still claim it hadn't been a one-shot deal. That paper wasn't signed, the Donoghues insist. That missing docu-

ment exists, they claim, in someone's dusty attic.

"Rag pickers, every one of them."

"Still counting on the Finkelsteins to help them with their thieving."

"Still feeding on the dole—"

"—rechristened, Affirmative Action."

Dewey railed against the dangers electricity would bring, but electricity was here to stay; modernity won out. It was utilitarian, claimed the utilities; you flipped a switch and all went dark; you didn't have to blow against the flame.

"No telephones," he ordered next while trying to be thorough, but soon he realized that that was a mistake.

Both Noralee and Little Melly would no more have stopped eavesdropping on party lines than they would have quit turning Doctorjay's ballooning trouser pockets inside out, while he kept snoring gently, in hopes of finding clues to augment the excitement of the universe.

When folks began to gossip electrically, their tongues just ran away! Most prairie ladies loved the telephone so much they wished they could have listened with both ears. No housewife worth her yeast supply could be so busy that she didn't strain to catch the latest rumor. When blizzards arrived, and telephone wires oft came tumbing down—why, those were trying times!

Full force came next the flivver craze. At a Rotarian luncheon, Jan stood to make a speech. The audience hushed with reverence.

"The future," said Jan Neufeld, "will be set free with flivvers."

With money from the parcel Daisy brought into the marriage, Dewey was the first to buy himself a motor horse with which to follow weddings, funerals and scandals at ever greater speed. Day by day, he clattered round the countryside in search of would-be Christians. Stop signs were few and far between, and Dewey would forget all about Little Melly's warnings and soar along the streets of Mennotown and out into the prairie, never mind diges-

tion, with little Archie huddled by his side. The cow pies flew apart.

Next, Jan decided he would build a replica of Apanlee. That was what Josie wanted. What Josie wanted, Josie got. She wanted Apanlee.

Jan pleased her every way he could, for she was still the little Josie of his heart, and if she wanted Apanlee—why, Jan built Apanlee! When, at last, the stubborn snow drifts melted, and the sap of yet another spring surged to the top of every tree, Jan bought a special tract of land to build his wife a home. A separate home from Lizzy's. By then, he had white hair, and Josie had seven daughters.

"You can come visiting," said Jan, who sensed his mother's anguish. "As often as you like. It's only a short walk."

Did that help ease the devastation of rejection? "I'm old now. Old and useless," said Lizzy, sniffling bounteously. "The few years I have left, to spend with my dear family, matter not at all. To anyone." For Lizzy, this was just like giving up the throne. She had hoped to live out what remained of her life with her family under one roof.

Jan soothed Lizzy, as best as he knew how. "We'd love to have you come and visit. Come visit every Sunday, Mom. Be sure. And don't forget."

"No. No. I would be underfoot."

"Come early. And stay late," Jan pleaded earnestly.

"You mean that, Jan?"

"Of course."

"I would be underfoot."

"The very thought!"

"You're sure? I won't be underfoot?"

"Please come. As often as you like."

So that is what she did, by way of compromise, the family album wedged beneath her arm.

The couple's new home was magnificent. No edifice in all of Kansas offered more by way of quality, convenience, space and

light. It had large, two-foot window sills on which to grow geraniums, which Josie promised Lizzy that she would—as soon as she found time. It had a foreroom, a corner room, a small room, a back room, a summer room, and an enormous parlor. The parlor had a huge brick fireplace—the biggest one around!—but Josie wailed she wanted two; why had the builders not built two, as she had specified?

Her new home had a porch up front and bright, blue shutters all around. She decided she wanted them beige. The painter came and changed the colors, muttering under his breath.

She took the brush out of his hand and added an elegant trim. That idea was Hebrew as well. They were gaudy, and Josie was gaudy. They were tawdry, and Josie was, too. That was the sentiment.

Not that Jan cared. He could have bought himself as much of history as anyone around; by then, he had great wealth, but he had little use for Apanlee or memories of Apanlee. Jan had no use for history. He was a real American that way—deep into electricity.

Jan built a U-shaped buiding, where wheat was cleaned and dried, then carried onto moving belts which fed adjoining silos. The windows of Jan's mill and silos—just squares of warmth and gold!

"It's Satan who's driving the light through the wires," cried Little Melly, never one to wear her Faith lightly. Once, when she reached to flip a switch, a soggy dish rag in her hand, the demons rushed right through her fingertips. For days, she couldn't stop shaking, but in the end, prayers proved potent antidotes.

"The magic power," Jan explained, as always hugely animated by Little Melly's terrors, "runs straight uphill. Uphill! Around the corner. Through the walls. In fact, in any old direction."

"No! You don't say! Are you a sorcerer, or what?"

He smiled at her. "Just practical."

She cast down modest lids. "No one but you! Incredible!"

This was their weekly ritual. He would explain the modern

world to her; she listened. She'd dress in checkered skirt and flowered blouse, put on pink socks, shake out her skirt to make it fall in swells, then take the young fry in her charge to be weighed in—and thus compared!—to Josie's bony son.

"Half-starved, the little fellow," said Little Melly pointedly, as soon as she spied Josie with practiced eagle's eyes. "And is that any wonder?"

"What do you mean by that?" jumped Josie. She always jumped when stung.

"You know as well as I."

"My son is first in all his classes. Go ask. Just go ahead. Ask anyone."

"Too skinny. Far too skinny. Watch out for scurvy, Josie."

"The Lord has given lavishly," said Little Melly next, while sitting as a Sunday guest on Josie's davenport. "We must give something back. I'm here collecting for my brother. I hope I kept nobody waiting?"

"The very thought," said Josie, removing another damp diaper. "Go help yourself. Here. Have a cup of coffee."

"I'd rather have tea. Tea, please, if you don't mind. How old is that jam?"

"Last year's."

"It has a touch of mildew."

Just as the swallows came in May, so Dewey's sister came collecting for his missions in November. She came and didn't go away; and her message was always the same.

"We must surrender ten percent. Maladies are sure to strike if we neglect to tithe."

"Here. Have another piece of strudel, Little Melly. It won't hurt your digestion."

"Dewey's doing wondrous things for Alabama's shut-ins."

"And for the Indians in Alaska."

"Why, Josie! You remember!"

"I wish you luck," said Josephine, who could be cruel beyond belief. "And I wish Dewey luck. But I support the causes

of my choice."

Lizzy, on stand-by, chirped brightly: "She's kidding. Stay put, Little Melly. She's joking. Sit back, Little Melly. She's merely teasing you."

"She heard me. She has ears." Josie's pulse began to race; her neck was growing mottled. "I said that I support the causes of my choice. That's what I said. That is my final word."

"And what is that supposed to mean?" asked Little Melly, already roused for battle.

"As if you didn't know. Speak up. Don't beat about the bush."

"Oh, Little Melly, hush! Don't get yourself excited. All Josie meant to say was—"

"I can speak for myself."

"The Lord has blessed you lavishly," said Little Melly, hugely entertained. "You've got to share. You've got to."

"She's got a point." Already Lizzy wrung her hands, but fact was fact: the evidence stared everybody in the face: ever since the margin child had started taking elocution lessons, Jan's offerings had fallen off alarmingly.

"Is that a fact? What point is that? I have no say in Jan's donations. All I'm saying is—"

"Now, lovey, hush. Please. Hush."

"—all I'm saying is he has his charity; I have my charity. Why can't I have a charity? What's fair is fair. If Jan can have a charity, then I can have a charity."

"What charity," asked Little Melly pointedly, "is that?"

"Look for yourself. Here is my can. Next to my labeled spices."

Little Melly shook the tin can carefully. She shook it first against her right ear, then against her left. Next, she put on her glasses.

"Go on. Read what it says."

"It says Susan B. Anthony."

"Who's she? I never heard of Susan Bee." Lizzy was edging closer.

"I'll bet you haven't. That's my point."

"Who is this Susan Bee? The head of the Salvation Army?"

And Josephine, triumphantly: "A pioneer to stop the slavery of women."

Lizzy all but swooned with shock. Little Melly sat waiting, inspecting the tips of her fingers. The silence stretched and stretched.

In the end Josie cried, choked with feelings: "You two. You listen. You two listen hard! I support the suffragette cause. Do you know what that means? Do you know what being a suffragette means?"

"Yes," whimpered Lizzy. "I looked it up. It's worse than misbelieving. It's renegading, Josephine."

"It's not. It merely means—"

"Have you become one of those daffy females who are trying to wobble the globe?"

"It's about voting!" shouted Josie.

"Voting?"

"Voting! You heard me. Voting."

"Why would you want to vote?" moaned Lizzy.

"Why would I not?"

"Jan votes for you! You know he votes with your welfare on his mind! Is there a better man than Jan, who cares more deeply for his family and votes accordingly?"

"Voting for a candidate," lectured a beet-red Josie, who'd rather read than eat, "is an illegal act for criminals. For lunatics. For idiots. And me."

"Sit down. Please. Calm yourself!"

"I have no legal rights. My daughters will grow up and have no legal rights."

"You have more rights than you could possibly use up. Does your fine husband ever tell you no? You can order anything you wish from the wish book."

"I'm not his pet. I've got a brain. I think. That is my passion. He treats me like a child."

"What's wrong with that?" asked Little Melly, nibbling on a

cheese bit.

"Some people," Josie hissed, "will see some mighty changes around here. You'll be surprised. We're reforming the political landscape. We're revising the laws of the land. Women's prospects have never looked brighter."

The spinster looked at her with small but steely eyes. "That's what you think. That's just your own opinion."

"This is America."

"You're entitled to your own opinion."

"You watch. This is America."

"But see? Here in America, our Savior calls the shots."

"Some mighty changes! Mark my word!"

"Oh, really?"

"Really! Absolutely!"

"Well. We shall see."

"That's right! That is precisely right! You listen to me, Little Melly! When women grow at last beyond the point where they cut paper doilies to spruce up some Rotary Club, that's when they'll find themselves—"

"—left hanging by their fingernails," said Little Melly pleasantly, and picked a cheese crumb from her lap. "If you don't mind, another piece of strudel."

# Chapter 33

"Reform? Yet more reform?" The mild tsar shook his head.

Reform was reform, conceded the tsar, but coercion was clearly coercion. He was obliging, courteous and lenient, but when it came to blackmail, to that he would not yield.

He offered, timidly, as a concession, that he would finish what his progressive grandfather had begun. "But at my leisure," said the tsar, to which the Empress nodded.

Yet on the other hand, he said repeatedly as well, he would not slam the door on centuries. He knew, as did his ministers, the seed of Judah was fervently behind the oft-repeated sacrilege of insurrection, and for their blasphemy, such knaves went to the gallows. That was his alpha and omega as one long century behind him turned to dust. His spies, to a body, spoke German.

While deviationists stirred riots in the cities, few farmer residents at Apanlee in the first decade of the new century paid any heed to folly. The orthodox priests, swinging their incense in arches, pronounced the harvests good.

Wealth took hard work. Thrift, moderation, prudence, diligence had stood the test of time. There were no malcontents at

Apanlee. The sons did better than their fathers; their sons, in turn, would reap richer harvests in turn. The cosmic gears meshed smoothly—much like the fanciful machinery of Apanlee, the German showcase farm all strove to emulate—reaping the wheat, binding the straw into tight, even bundles.

By then, one of the finest grain estates in all of the Ukraine had been passed down to Hein, grandson of Peet and Greta Neufeld. Hein was a handsome, robust youth, not in the least inclined to curb the ways of nature with restraint.

Born on the very day the anarchists had thrown a bomb beneath the horses' hooves that tore a mild, progressive tsar apart and changed the course of Russia forever, no one knew better than did Hein how to impose his will.

Hein took his time to find the Lord, forsake the appetites of his red, fleshy heart, and settle down to business.

The elders often sat him down for coffee and small talk. While washing down their zwieback with their coffee, they would come to the point at once: "You wouldn't want to get involved romantically with anyone whose surname you could easily forget?"

It wasn't that he wasn't willing to follow custom and tradition. Everybody, in the end, was willing. But Hein's vitality ran strong, and his hot glance had fallen on a Ukrainian servant girl—a maid with callused heels and strong, efficient hands, a splendid, healthy female.

Her first name was Natasha. She didn't know her last.

Hein harvested and leveled his potatoes. Behind him stood a kinship net that numbered in the thousands. The Lord had seen them through one century. He would do likewise in the next.

The Elders kept a strict eye on trespasses.

The nearby Catholics just sprinkled; the Lutherans dunked newborns head-first in their galvanized, wide buckets; the priests tried to stifle their yawns. The Apanlee Elders, by contrast, were grim. They baptized youngfolk thoroughly, by triple and total immersion, in the waterhole behind the trees of Apanlee, assuring salvation the trustworthy, traditional way. You had your rules;

you lived by them; it was best to leave nothing to chance.

The Elders told the congregation pointedly, their eyes on Hein's red ears:

"Remain apart. Keep pure the pool of kin. For if you do, your yield will be magnificent. Your children's future will be without shadows."

These Elders preached inspiring sermons, for if you married—as you would!—why, then their blessing was essential. Unheard of was it in those days that one might marry anyone not bred to, raised by, and furthermore confirmed in the True Faith.

The Elders' thoroughness pleased everyone. Their shortest prayers lasted seven minutes. When they came calling, the children greeted them and took their hats, then shrank into the darkness. If you knew what was good for you, you harmonized with them. In their frowns, you read your doom. If they grabbed you by the arm to reinforce a rule, sooner they'd break it before they let go.

As soon as the sun started licking the puddles, the Elders started masterminding spring conversions with customary zeal. Baptisms fed the church, as young love fed the cradles—if cleverly you knew how to combine the two, the future was assured.

The deacons took swift count: "You. You. And you and you and you. Just about old enough. You need your Savior's saving grace before it is too late."

"Right after Pentecost," most eager youngfolk said.

The earth was in full bloom; their hearts were wide-open while they were in love; the Holy Ghost marched in and set up residence.

That was wonderful spiritual acreage!

In those slow, pious, bygone days, there was something to youth, love and bonding that no words and no songs could decipher—enchanting as a falling meteor, as fragile as is gossamer. Silk stockings had not yet reached Russia.

A rooster crowed. The cows were red and white.

A muzhik let sharp vodka run across his tongue and mum-

bled this and that.

Jew, Christian or Turk—all were the same to little Uncle Benny. Life was like pointing with a pencil in a book; he moved from word to word.

You lived from day to day. You lived in peace. With gratitude. A few remaining oldsters who still remember Apanlee will tell you to this day that's how it was—how peaceful and how lovely life was. Just flowing as a river flows amidst the downpour of warm rain. Smooth. Effortless.

You knew exactly where you stood, in which direction lineage pointed, and where you would end up—with the Lord in celestial spheres.

And who would dare to say that that was wrong? That it was wicked? Racist?

You lived by nature's ways. You could hear snatches of a love song here and there, the even, happy laughter of a girl.

Count yourself blessed—such was the sentiment.

The acacia trees bent low to the earth with their clusters of flowers; the bachelors would pick at them and suck the sweetness from the pistil's base, surveying marriage-worthy maidens with longing. The Elders knew: "It's now or never!" to warn the young of the torments of sinners in hell.

The Elders briskly went to work, saving the lambs, not just from the Fiend, but from the missionary wiles of Catholics and Lutherans.

"Listen, you. And you. And you. Your loins are hot? Your heart is churning? You are a sinner, through and through. You need the Savior's church; the Savior's church needs you. Your warranty, you ask? The splendor of His promise. Brief are your days on earth. Eternal the hereafter."

There was no question mark, no compromise. What lay in store in the hereafter could be glimpsed merely in the exaltation of good prayers—but every Elder put his reputation on the line: when it came to the clan, obedience and discipline for now, but

glory upon glory at the end.

It took little effort, for instance, to baptize Marleen. Marleen was ready. Well-scrubbed. Willing. Marleen stood poised, just waiting for the nod.

Chosen carefully by several worried Elders to counteract the lures that seemed to plague the lusty heir of Apanlee, Marleen arrived one frosty winter morning, replete with darning bulb.

She was warming herself by the pot-bellied stove, her face as serious as the moon. She came of proven stock. There was some Epp blood in her veins, warranting piety, mixed in with Friesens, Harders, Unruhs. No quirks that could have shocked the elders were known among her relatives.

She wore long braids. Each day, she combed them out with pride.

Before long, she was knitting her third pair of slippers. Above all else, she liked to knit; she would make sure her daughters would do likewise.

She was in love with Hein as the earth is in love with the clouds; it was in the natural order. She was in full agreement with the Elders: restraint was correct in someone so sure of her virtue as she.

Although Hein took his time in taking her measure, that daunted not Marleen, who, with the greatest confidence, threw herself into wedding preparations.

She had already, years ago, stitched for her hope chest all the pillows she would need. When the remotest relatives arrived, as surely they would, as soon as she and Hein prepared to tie the knot officially and with the sanction of the Faith, they knew they would receive a warm reception and a warm feather bed where they could settle down to stay.

She may have had love in her eyes; she also had steel in her spine. She tutored Hein at every opportunity. "Ready for baptism yet?"

He said to her: "Your face is as familiar to me as though you were my sister."

She spoke in warning undertones: "The hoots and hisses will come thick."

He was an unconvincing liar. "I know not what you mean."

They were of equal height; her eyes met his at level glance. She told him evenly: "I won't be branded as a fool. You have a year to think it over." That was Marleen, known for her rectitude, admired for her common sense. She washed her hands before she folded them in prayer. She leafed through her Bible, page after page; what she found there, she extracted and applied.

Now and then, she consulted the Elders in pastoral fashion. They told her that her strategy was apt.

That's what it took, they counseled—an ultimatum, the Bible and a moment ripe enough to take advantage of that quickening of spirit that often coincided with the quickening of body and made a man start looking eagerly for an obedient, willing wife.

Natasha seemed to say, if only to herself: "I have not a moment to lose."

Natasha was a pretty thing with hazel eyes and ample hair who radiated invitation like a wide stove stoked with pines. A Russian hamlet brought her forth; she didn't even know her birthday; she came to Apanlee while still a teenager to help bring in the harvest.

She worked quickly, expertly, her collar undone, the stains of effort showing in the armpits of her blouse. Hein noticed with a tingle in his belly that, when he spoke to her, rich hues moved over her.

His glance slid to her bosom. Her peasant odor dizzied.

She watched his eyes, enthralled, amazed, and mystified. She started to surmise: "The river is swollen with rain."

He knew that it was wrong. She knew that it was fate. There was a dark fatality in her that didn't show while she was young but marked her later years.

What happened next was easy to divine. The meadows, rife with rumor!

Natasha laughed and ducked and flirted with her lashes. Her eyes shone with excitement. Hein watched her all day long. He noticed that she, too, would start to tremble helplessly whenever he was near.

He told her when they were alone: "I'll trade you a new hay rake for a kiss."

She noticed that his neck turned pink, then red; she was nobody's fool. At *vespa* break, she set herself apart to give the heir of Apanlee a chance to speak to her. That was, she knew, an act of shrewd diplomacy.

He leaped to the challenge at once. He came and sat, squatting, before her.

"How pretty you are." With his thumb, he was stroking the soles of her feet. "A beastly heat, right? Just look at you! You're soaking wet with sweat!"

She unwrapped the rich food that Marleen—deaf, dumb and blind, and probably dead where it mattered—had packed for them both. "Here. Have a bite." Onions and bread, cold cutlets and zwieback, a jug filled with kvas. "I'm surprised at you," she laughed. She poured the kvas, leaning back into the shade of the acacias. "Well? What's on your mind?

"You must be hot. Are you hot? How your blouse sticks—"

"I am drenched with perspiration to the skin. Look at me. Just look at me." She prompted him to treachery. "Why don't you look at me?"

He struggled to obtain firm footing. "Are you alone? Where do you live? Your eyes are glossy as satin."

She held a piece of sugar between her even teeth and let the kvas surge through. "All alone. Just a pig and a goat."

"Look what I wrote for you," he stammered, slipping her a small piece of paper. "It's a deal. I'll make you a deal. You hanker to better your future?"

"What's it to me?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know that I can barely write my name."

"I'll teach you," said Hein, heavy with meaning. "Depend

on me. I'll teach you everything."

She wasn't born a simpleton. "You will?"

She knew a man's desire. Just like a horse—no matter where it started out, it never missed the stable. "I might teach you a thing or two," she offered wantonly.

Hein knew he loved his chosen well enough. He knew Marleen would serve him faithfully; she would never belittle his mustache. She had an impeccable family name. He knew she knew as everybody knew: "This is an interlude."

"I'll wait my turn," Natasha said and fell, laughing, on Hein's shoulder.

Had she let go of pride, Marleen might well have willed a miracle, but she did not—why should she have?—since Hein regarded her with awe. The Elders were already polishing their sermons to tie the wedding knot.

Marleen said calmly, more than once: "So? And so what?" The falling leaves kept dancing at her feet in heedless, jerky gusts.

Natasha kept teasing. And teasing. And teasing.

Hein stared at her, enthralled. He kept pulling loose the strings of her apron—the antics of a young boy with a slingshot in his hands compelled to hurl that pebble one more time into the glossy leaves before surrendering his boyhood to the somber duties of the corncribs and the stables and the fields.

"What will you teach me? Say?"

"You'll see. What? Are you doubting me?"

"Anything that I don't know already?" She blew against the tufts of hair that sprouted on his knuckles. "I might teach you a thing or two."

"You will?"

She patted her belly after the meal. "You know what I mean. This is your one and only chance. There's a fellow who's waiting for me."

Fire and brimstone!

Hein knew about fire and brimstone from many a blistering sermon. He turned and tried to walk away from her with butter

in his knees. In fact, he tried to run.

"I might wait to be taught," she called after him, just tumbling her long hair about; she knew him well; he never had a chance; he turned and seized her hand and pressed it with moist palms—and blast the firing squad!

"Come to the barn after dark," he whispered fervently. "I'll forget to drop the latch." The sun kept on shedding its heat on them both. She smiled at him, dazed by her luck, confirmed in her Faith, her youth and her icons.

"I'll wait for you," she said, "to find your way to me."

# Chapter 34

From deferential ministers, at intervals, came word that all was well across the Russian land, in every respect. The courtiers doubled up in bows. Ambitious poets composed spicy songs. The gentry boasted about foreign travel.

A muffled roar rose from the river bank where a progressive priest plunged a fat cross into the icy waters of the Neva after having blessed it lavishly with ornate, garish words. The people in the streets watched as it sank. A raw wind drew tears to their eyes. Flags rippled. Music soared. The East began to pale. The soothsayers kept whispering.

We live and die; the tsars do what they want. God save our little tsar! God save his haughty *nyemka*! We live and die; unless the tsar throws us a bone. Is this a life worth living?

They stood there in a stony silence. Their thoughts were like poisonous smoke: "Day-in, day-out, toil and wear and stinging nettles. Day-in, day-out, cabbage soup and buckwheat gruel. Our foreheads touch mud in obedience. We trap for squirrels and sparrows; we starve to death on a pallet of straw. Our lyrics are soft, but our melodies carry our anguish."

The peasants in the countryside sank to their knees repeatedly and crossed themselves with ample gestures: "We? Humble beasts of burden. You sold us land we had no say in choosing, for debts we cannot pay. Our children are weeping with hunger. God save our little tsar. We long to see your face. We yearn to read your eyes."

The people dropped their heads like grain before the breeze:

"Everything yours—my land, my life, my sons, my bones. You rule us, control us. We gratify you; the sun itself gratifies you. We bow like oats during harvest. What are we? Who are we? But leaves in the merciless wind!"

They said, and it became a chant and then a moan and finally a roar: "Be good to him, oh Lord. Shield our Little Father."

The roar rolled to the Palace of the Fifteen-hundred Windows that sparkled with the sheen of many polished candelabras. The servants threw open the curtains. The courtiers stood aside respectfully. The tsar, whose heart was blind, whose mind could not sustain a single thought for any length of time, smiled amiably and waved with a weak wrist.

The whispers picked up speed. The wind scattered the words: "The throne will fall, a house of brittle cards."

The offspring of an Emperor so strong he bent a horseshoe with his hands, a ruler who cut off the heads of dissidents with his own well-oiled saber while roaring in his mirth, whose bronze horse statue reared its hooves right at the edge of an abyss, turned his attention to his dominoes.

The night was dark as ink. The rivers waited, paralyzed.

The prison roof moaned with the storm that came in broadside gusts. The cold pierced the prisoner's marrow and gave a blue tint to his nose.

"My brother climbed the scaffold, but not before he kissed the crucifix," the prisoner wrote haltingly. "His note books—always orderly. His name—without a blemish. He had a brilliant future. Save for the fire flaming in his veins at seeing peasants lying in the ditches with frozen feet and broken hearts, he

would have been a bureaucrat. Our mother hoped for that." On his eyebrows formed crystals of ice. "She walked him to the gallows. Before the hangman broke his neck, he kissed the crucifix—"

The raw air had worsened his cough. A cotton wick was flickering in a small dish filled slovenly with kerosene.

"—the pride of his teachers; the head of his class; a student with a promising horizon—"

On his lips formed a pledge by itself: "May my tongue cleave to my roof if I do not remember you as you should be remembered. And may my right arm wither if I don't right your wrong—"

That was the legacy. An unforgiving mandate settled down around his shoulders like a mantle. His inner eye saw nothing but a sea of upraised faces. A drowning man, he knew, will take an outstretched hand.

"What did the tsars decree? No building should be taller than the palace?"

Therefore, why not level the palace?

"Hack down the imperial emblems! To the dust bin of history, all!"

Thus wrote a bald-headed, tormented man, much better known to history as Lenin.

While brooding on his brother's execution, this man with slanted eyes and a maternal grandmother with rumored links to those the Lord had kept adrift upon the globe for ancient, ageless sins, wrote next with stiffened fingers:

"Bring the workers to power. Turn the world upside down. Be done with the knout and the whip. Throttle oppression with your bare hands. The sun of liberty will shine on you forever after!"

From black, sticky bread he had fashioned an inkwell into which he dipped a pen he had managed to hide from the guards. He kept it in the hollow heel of one of his torn boots. He never parted with his boots, not even when he slept; they kept his toes

from freezing.

"The barns and silos of the manors? The country mansions of the rich? Their stables full of trotting horses? Those animals are given better fodder than your little children, your aging parents have to eat—" He wrote with milk saved from a meager meal. He blew on it to let it dry. "Their end is etched into the brand new century with brilliant clarity. The Revolution will undo the tsars' fool's paradise. How? You ask how? Ivan the Terrible wrote you a script."

Death to the oppressors!

Destruction to the rich!

"Be done with your needless submission. Land is as free as the air. Take to your pitchforks. Fell them by the butt of gun. String them up like Christmas ornaments. Strangle them and drown them and dismember them—they are your mortal enemies. When you have taken your revenge, your precious foreigners will cling with broken fingers to a cliff."

When Erika, in her research for *Left and Right*, delved into this part of her troubled history, she found to her amazement the Kansas folks had simply no idea. They did not want to listen when she told them, in both her fists the damning documents: "The usurers, who lived like moles within the canyons of New York, sneaked him a tattered document."

"Not true!" insisted every relative, and that was that. No further argument.

"It is true, too! It's true!"

"This is America."

"You can't destroy the truth."

"It's anti-Semite talk."

"You check that out," said Erika, but no one had the time.

If it is true, it could not have been difficult. The Russian underling who was supposed to guard the prison gate had never learned to read. Why should he have been schooled when he was born to live a brutish life in squalor and vulgarity inherited through centuries? When he would die that way—if he was lucky, numbed

with vodka?

"*Da! Da!*" he said, glad for a chance to please, with not a single bread crust in his hovel to feed his hungry brood. He didn't even bother glancing at the paper. He jovially waved him on.

As leaves began to fall from trees all over Russia, a bitter man escaped across the border. The serpentines, so we are told, were there.

For quite a while, he hid himself in Switzerland. Before the year was out, his rhetoric and fame jumped borders. A helpful Jew gave him some money. With it, he purchased a small press. He started publishing *The Spark.*

Despite the Elders' pointed admonitions, Natasha kept on baiting Hein, until one Sunday afternoon he went in search of her. He rode his horse without the benefit of halter, armed only with a switch.

Natasha sunned herself out in the open air, to give him a chance to survey her. She squinted at a thundercloud that piled behind a tree. It was a hot and muggy day.

"Well. Here you are. Say what you will." She had confided to a friend: "I'll lead him away by the bridle."

In preparation of his visit, she had already scrubbed herself until she almost swooned. The friend had issued warnings: "Fire and water, Natasha. Fire and water!"

"He who stops, rusts," said Natasha. She believed that.

Her friend was not convinced, but Natasha explained herself clearly: "I want a bowl with yellow flowers. The saints are on my side."

For an entire week, she had moved her icons from corner to corner to give them additional light. "One step at a time," said Natasha. "One day at a time. One kiss at a time. That's how it will be, from now on."

"You never know whence danger lurks," she told Hein now, while he stood, smiling shakily, admiring the unbroken smoothness of her skin. He leaned toward her, whispering. "What are you doing here, alone?"

"I live here. Don't you know?"

"You do?"

"Whatever brings you here?" she asked with dancing eyes.

His ears were turning purple. "I can't imagine. You?"

"Eat salted cucumbers," laughed Natasha. "I will have none of your excuses. Keep your excuses, Hein!"

The storm broke suddenly.

"At your own risk and peril," she said, invitingly, to keep him from being pelted by raindrops. She knew that she was safe that day. The gypsy, with whom she had huddled, had promised.

He took her naked elbow, about to give up the ghost. "What do you want? A scarf?" Her frock with the convenient shoulder straps permitted him to push them down with ease. "A necklace with many unbreakable beads?"

"A dish with yellow flowers." She leaned against him cozily—a girl about to sin grossly.

All summer long, and deep into September, Natasha's dancing eyes never left the small, round beads that Hein had given her.

"A little something for the heart," Hein said to her, good-natured and in love, and she smiled back at him—two ill-matched lovers from the start, stripping leaves from swaying trees and laughing at each other throughout a long and violent summer, with many sudden thunderstorms. To the tossing of the wind and the cackling of the chickens, they fell asleep, content and sated both, while, outside, nature howled.

"I can't wait for the cold days," Natasha said to Hein when next he came to visit her, and rolled her hair in paper rollers to spruce herself a bit. She walked with lithe and happy steps, her feet in neatly plaited footwear, a present from Berdyansk where Hein would travel now and then to sell a load of grain.

"Why so?" he asked, his voice on the trigger of fire.

"More time for this and that," Natasha laughed at him.

These days, Natasha laughed. Marleen just clattered with her dishes. There was still a praiseworthy patience, but yet a

hard finish, to her.

The rains dissolved the summer, and still Natasha laughed. The melancholy days arrived; and then came fog; next, snow.

Marleen was resolved to sit out the siege.

Natasha, by contrast, fell asleep with a smile on her lips.

She was in love, and so was Hein; when passion struck, the heir of Apanlee was merciless in his rapacity but filled with tenderness and rue when all was said and done. That dish with yellow flowers was a start.

So, then: Natasha laughed.

An Elder heard that laughter and reached for walking stick and Bible. Two stalwart deacons joined adroitly. They spread the facts before the scofflaw, one by one: "Her father was a bonded serf. So was her grandfather. So was her great-grandfather. She is a bonded serf in anything but name—"

The guilty sinner sulked. "So what? It matters not." By then, his heart lay in a hammerlock between Natasha and Marleen.

"So what? What are you saying, Hein?"

"She's an obliging girl. She means no harm. She wouldn't harm a beetle."

"But water keeps on dripping from her ceiling. Her soup has too much salt. Her bread is black and sticky. Her straw is full of fleas."

Hein knew all that, yet could no more have stopped himself than he could have restrained a cloud from raining.

"I'll think your warning over," Hein offered, but those three men of God were not about to leave before the matter was resolved. The deacons and the Elder pointed out: "Hast thou but three small grains of sense, thou wouldst see what to do. Take thee this minute to thy prayer corner."

The thous and thees were harder to resist. They pricked Hein's conscience like salt sprinkled into a wound.

"I cannot hate her," argued Hein. "She is a kindly girl."

"We do not hate them," said the preachers. "But neither do we love them."

"I never said I loved her." Hein's mustache kept on twitching with his lie.

"And don't thou know—thou fool, thou wastrel and thou braggart—that Natasha has passed through a number of hands? Would thou not want an untouched maiden to bear thy progeny?"

At that the culprit, overwhelmed, lurched to his feet and dusted the straw from his trousers.

Marleen was faultless to a fault. He saw her merits now. He saw, by contrast, that Natasha couldn't darn and wouldn't learn; she went to church with her collar unfastened; she kept her hut too hot, her sheepskin untidy, the corners of her dwelling full of cobwebs. The Elders forced the issue at every opportunity.

But still he frowned with indecision. The Lord might come with thunderbolts and fiery darts, but he was a young man, built like that oak that grew securely by the waterhole, his tap root anchored in the earth—and every little leaf, like naked skin, lay exposed to the onslaught of seasons.

"If thou don't keep thy promise," growled the Elder, "then God will surely strike thee dead."

"I'll try to keep my promise," pledged Hein, but wouldn't be specific.

Hein knew the rules as well as anyone—to marry within clan was in close keeping with your station; it was in keeping with the bargains the creed had struck with Providence. Yet still Natasha lured. A song was always on her lips. She admired his masterful mustache.

The Elders tried their best to lure the heir of Apanlee away from his temptation: installing untried melodies into their sermons fore and aft, inviting him to prayer breakfasts well fortified with chicken legs, and making sure the girl they had approved of was at hand and seated down beside him.

"No progress yet, Marleen? Then place an extra egg for him in your own samovar."

"Not yet. There is yet time." The girl spoke evenly, her

quote book in her lap. At night, Marleen lay awake in her clean, narrow bed, struggling with the misery that rakes an untouched body.

"1902. Hein N." said the letters, cut in the bark of the old oak Peet Neufeld had grown from a seedling.

That was the year a young, squat man with webbed toes and pockmarked face was exiled to Siberia—yet one more dissident, enmeshed in one more strike, to die, the monarchs hoped, of want and overwork.

His property was one exhausted horse. His name was Joseph Stalin.

At Apanlee, none would have known.

By then, Hein stood crushed against the wall of rectitude his bloodline had thrown up, resolved to be done with temptation. Beneath his name, he tried to carve: "Marleen."

His knife slipped, and he, bleeding profusely, went to the kitchen where Marleen watched the Sunday rooster sizzling in the pan. He let her bind his wound. She kept her eyes downcast. She knew the spinsters kept on gossiping in undertones; the children craned their necks.

When Hein returned a fortnight later, a stranger's hand had carved into the tree above his name, in smaller, slanted letters: "Natasha."

He took an ax to hew out every trace. The sap oozed from the wound.

That week, Natasha broke away the gum that formed to heal the tree. She ate it for good luck.

# Chapter 35

The firstborn didn't make it, sadly, past McGuffey's Reader, and that was partly Doctorjay's and partly Josie's fault. It was this elocution business, and it was just as Little Melly had predicted from the start—the Lord meant business: He'd snarled the youngster's tongue to teach a haughty soul a lesson. The boy kept his pronounced and hopeless stammer. No ointment diminished the ailment.

It would not have mattered to anyone else, for a fault was a fault, all people had faults.

But it mattered to Josie. She wanted perfection. She flinched when the margin boy stuttered. She never lived down speculation that she herself had brought on the affliction, since her premarriage days were not as pure as snow.

But Josie didn't shrink from trouble; that was not in her nature. Instead, she tried to force the heavy hand of God, Who had given the stutter and could likewise have wiped it away.

She took her son's small hand, spurning the fine basement Special School for Backward Children at the corner of Maple and Main, manned by rotating volunteers, insisting: "There is

nothing the Wichita doctors can't fix."

She worked it out with Doctorjay that he, still swapping mail and politics each Wednesday afternoon, would take the youngster once a week to Wichita for his elocution lessons, and likewise bring him back. She wouldn't take no for an answer, not even from the weighty hand of God.

It was a wretched accident.

She loved to read when snow fell thick and soft; she pushed her nose through yet another book and didn't sense that night was falling; she never noticed anything; she just assumed that Doctorjay would pick the little fellow up; he always picked him up returning from his rounds on Wednesdays—but Doctorjay forgot.

His mind befogged, he thought that it was Tuesday.

The constable would later piece together the details. The little boy tried hitching rides from passersby, and when that effort failed, tried hard to make it home alone, while a tremendous snowstorm built and started blowing fiercely. The railing of the bridge was broken. There was a snowdrift, way below, atop the frozen creek. He must have leaned against the bridge to catch his breath. And slipped. And fallen in.

Barn lanterns flickering like witches' tongues, the neighbors looked for him for days—no time for drink and food. But all in vain. They never found the child. The wind erased all traces.

The winter lasted long that year. The snow lay deep and hard. The only thing a neighbor found, right before Easter Sunday, was just one little shoe. It was lying in a furrow where overflowing waters carried it when spring's thaw caused a flood.

One outcome was that Doctorjay tried hard to stop all drinking. He promised that he wouldn't touch another drop for many cheerless years.

The neighbors nodded, fortified: embedded in sorrow lay blessings. The neighbors knew: the Lord takes care to wash thine eyes with tears so thou canst see thine guilt.

The healer stood before the grieving parents, hat in hand, his heart wrung like a dishrag, as his tears disappeared in his beard. "Will you ever forgive an old donkey like me?"

As soon as Josephine could speak, she told him that she shared his burden. She was so pale she was translucent; all color had been drained from her.

"It was my fault as much as yours," said Josephine. It was as if she scattered mental petals on a non-existent coffin that held not just her child but a large part of her—that radiant Josie of Jan's heart whom he loved more than life.

"Don't say that," muttered Doctorjay, at long last sober to the marrow, and she leaned over briefly and touched his trembling hand.

For the rest of his boisterous life, he would cling to that merciful gesture.

But what was one small, accidental death to Mennotown, where life went on as always? If Josie wept, none saw her tears—not even Jan, not even Lizzy. No one.

She went into one of her many disguises. She hid herself away.

Lizzy, on the other hand, kept keening. She cried and moaned and wailed. She simply couldn't stop.

The death was hard on Jan as well, but he had friends; he had his church; he had his mother and his sisters and his daughters. He tried to comfort Josie. He delved into his duties. He forged ahead with many plans, and sought his balm in work and yet more work. His grain lay waiting in the sun; another century was here, rife with opportunities; he had no time to waste another day.

Josie, who loved privacy, sat by herself, alone, all wrapped in stony silence. The rivers roared; she grieved.

The household put the tulips in her charge, and still she grieved. She grieved.

Time passed. She grieved. She didn't cry, although her shoulders shook.

The prairie turned all emerald before it changed to sapphire,

and still she grieved. It would not end; she couldn't help herself. Relatives arrived, in droves, to lend their company and offer prayers; yet Josie grieved. They left their Bibles sitting on her window sills. But nothing helped. She grieved.

The answer, she was told with ever greater stridency, was to be born again. "There's peace in surrender to Jesus," they told her. "You must cleanse yourself in His blood."

She said that made no sense at all. "That's monstrous. That's obscene."

Josie wasn't buying. The accident was etched into her memory as if with diamond on clear glass.

"You'll greatly benefit from loving company," said Lizzy, pleadingly. "Please. Here. Just blow your nose. Come join our quilting circle."

"I am a stranger and do not belong," said Josie, but put on a pair of galoshes and went.

The neighbors hovered over her with low and clucking noises:

"A tragic mishap," said one.

"A lesson somewhere," said another. "We warned you. Did you listen?"

She ducked as she had ducked that long-remembered night before she flung her songbook in the fire.

"Do not be deceived, God is not mocked, for whatsoever a man sows, that will he also reap."

All afternoon, they carved new chasms in her grief. The creek, too deep to cross? The temperature just plummeted? One darling little shoe? And that without its laces?

A horse fly has a mission.

"Hath not the potter power over clay? If thou shalt now confess with thine own mouth your Lord Christ Jesus—"

She sat there, trapped, wedged in between huge shanks. Teeth gritted. Face aflame.

The oxen were long gone, the finest surreys going out of fashion. The shiftless Donoghues still clucked their carts along.

With Doctorjay hard on his heels, Jan bought himself a flivver.

The motor car Jan ordered from St. Louis turned out to be the ultimate in betterment and class, and Little Melly was so overcome to see Jan motorized she nearly burst with pride.

Though Little Melly never altogether lost her fears that such unholy speed could do real havoc to her bowels, when it came to Jan and his beloved flivver, she was as devoted as ever. She raised her pudgy finger: "Shhh!" as soon as he revved up his engine.

Jan loved that Model T. He relished the roar and didn't mind fumes. He could recite a flivver manual from memory. When Jan spun the tires, they started to smoke. He had grease splatter inside his ears.

It was a fine contraption—flat-nosed, full-bellied, fully maneuverable on any country road. In height, it measured seven feet.

Little Melly dressed it up with fine, embroidered curtains. He stored it in an old, abandoned chicken shed where she squashed several spiders. He told her flivver jokes. She liked Jan's flivver jokes, but she herself was no vehicular fanatic. She didn't lose sight of the signal that her feet belonged on the ground.

The race for honor and prestige it was that spurred the men of Mennotown to own a motor car.

The slowest sluggard knew: a new dawn had arrived.

As candidate for chairman of the Mennotown Chamber of Commerce, Jan bought his flivver just in time to tip the balance in that race. Doctorjay, who likewise hankered for that honor—though he would never have admitted such ambitions to his wife; her hoots might never stop!—gave up his surrey, retired Annetta, and vouched to go motorized, too.

For many years, Doctorjay had done his doctoring atop his one-horse shay still pulled by his old horse, albeit now on thick, arthritic legs. He and Annetta both were fixtures—near legends, by that time. The two had been a feature in the paper. Behind them stretched a history that no one could deny.

The day that article came out, Doctorjay came near explod-

ing with vanity and pride. He flicked the reins across Annetta's ears and shouted himself hoarse: "*Pascholl*, Annetta! Giddap, Annetta!" as he passed envious pedestrians, rolling slow and proud.

Now this? Who would have ever thought he could betray Annetta?

"What can a fellow do? Can't argue with success," boasted he, the tip of his nose getting redder and redder.

Doctorjay went off and bought himself a flivver of his own with lots of chrome and a loud horn. His new possession offered him unheard-of, undreamed freedom. Now he could disappear periodically into the haunts of Wichita, exchange as many handshakes as he liked, return in time, and not offend the town. He claimed he didn't drink. He merely visited.

"I'd like to see it first," said Noralee. "You promise, then forget."

She, for her part, was skeptical. He had black patches in his mind where memory should be.

She noticed that he kept forgetting things, events and places: everything. She forecast disaster and worse.

"One of these days—" she pointed an accusing finger, "you'll not remember who you are. You'll forget what to do. One day you'll lose your head."

And all the while his friends were saying to themselves: "There's nothing that can hold him back! Just look at Doctorjay!"

The speculations had it wrong. Now that he had a motor toy to fill his veins with warmth, his flask lost some allure. Not all, but some. He used to keep it hidden in the waistband of his trousers: that's where he now stored oily rags, screwdrivers of assorted sizes, a small can of expensive motor oil, and a much-thumbed-through manual. It came replete with etiquette: "Above all else, do not poke with a stick into the mechanism. That is the height of rudeness."

And, oh, how he babied that engine!

He came to know his flivver with an intimacy with which he never knew another human being; he could have taken it apart blindfolded, then put it back together, and still it would have run. He took good care of it; it needed shade, just like a horse; it shook and trembled when he paid attention, emitting soot and smoke. The joy, the wonder of it all!

"That is America for you," he said to Jan, and slapped him on the shoulder.

"Right. Right you are," said Jan, who seldom contradicted anyone, not even Josephine.

The two grown men were ape about their flivvers. There was no greater pleasure, then as now, as any woman knows, for a man in love with cars to come across another faulty gauge.

This suited Noralee. No longer did she have to ask: "Now, Doctorjay. Where were you, Doctorjay?" and watch him struggle for excuses.

Now she knew where she should look. Chances were that she could find her husband in Jan's company, or Jan in Doctorjay's, stretched out, full-length, beneath the chassis—inspecting, greasing, polishing. They hammered, and they patched. They ripped out screws and hoses, and put them in again.

"See? Once we get this baby rolling, an easy forty miles an hour," they bragged to passersby.

"I say that's modest! Modest! Take on another five!"

"These babies, built for speed!"

"As much as fifteen hundred miles out of a single tire!"

For hours, they computed fuel consumption, chalking up imaginary savings. They turned on the ignition and spun at the crank. The motor caught, then sputtered, caught again. They stroked the hood as though it were a living being—there wasn't any end to the suspense of what a motor car could do.

"Just watch the bridge! Watch out!" shrieked an excited Noralee.

Mocking laughter, that was her reward as she watched the two mainstays of the neighborhood—grown, somber fellows—become two mindless boys and roar the length of Mennotown,

cascading fountains of dirt. Their voices grew lustier and lustier. Cows leaped aside for safety. Annetta was left standing in the dust.

Wherever Dewey preached, the angels played their harpsichords. Therefore, to no one's great surprise, Dewey chose to preach full-time.

"I was not meant to waste the land," he said to Jan, apologizing. "I must bow to the burden of my calling."

He up and sold the second parcel by the brook that Jan had given Daisy for her dowry. He sold it at a loss, without first giving Jan the courtesy of purchasing it back. Only after all the paperwork was signed did Mennotown discover with dismay that he had sold it to the Donoghues, a bunch of brutes by all accounts, who smothered their chickens with pepper.

"No way to get it back?" asked Lizzy, guiltily, still thinking of the missing title.

Jan read the bill of sale in silence before he passed it on. "No. It's too late. It worked to their advantage that the title wasn't clear."

Lizzy could have kicked herself. She'd turned every corner in her attic, turned every drawer inside out—she must have put it through the wash; the crucial deed was gone.

She tried to be a charitable Christian, but the full evidence was there, it couldn't be denied: the Donoghues were trouble; they were up to no good. On more than one occasion, the constable had tried to run them out of town; by nightfall, they were back.

Now the detested Donoghues had gained not just a toehold but a foothold: they now resided next door, practically—and smirking at her rooster.

Modernity was in the air: more was yet to come.

Gone were the days of flails and hand-driven fans; long gone were the ornery mules—which didn't, on the other hand, need brush and paint and linseed oil to keep the rust away.

Only yesterday, the farmers stood in sweaty shirtsleeves on the platforms, to bind the grain and drop the sheaves in piles. Now modern threshing outfits moved from farm to farm in early August, gigantic caterpillars built of steel. Jan's binders came and bound with wire, while he stood by and watched.

Josie started flirting with further modern notions. Her zeal to catch up with the world was so extreme that even Lizzy, already sensing Jan's heart breaking, bit by bit, stood tremblingly behind the door to listen.

By all accounts, the most progressive female, by that time, in all of Sedgwick County, and beyond, was Josie. She willy-nilly pulled the lead out from her hem to keep her skirt demurely at her ankles so she could climb aboard Jan's flivver, unhampered and headstrong. She even shortened it to two inches up above her ankle. Away she roared, hair flying in the wind, and gave no second thoughts to fanciful disorders of the digestive tract believed to be the outcome.

In months to come, Josie and Jan argued a lot. Their voices grew louder and louder. A shadow formed over their union.

His love was a burden, she argued, for it led to additional children—one in her arms, two more at her legs, a forth not even potty trained—where would it end? Such was her litany. She had no shame. She used peculiar words, and didn't draw the shutters. The arguments went on through the night and sometimes spoiled Jan's breakfast.

Jan tore down his outdated mill where stones had ground the wheat. His new mill was talked of as a miracle: a hundred barrel rolling mill, its wires spreading tentacles all over the expanded, airy attic; its power-driven belts kept sorting kernels from the chaff.

"This makes God weep," said Dewey. It couldn't last, said Dewey. What about tried-and-true, old-fashioned elbow grease? You freed up leisure time, and that gave Lucifer more margin.

Though many disagreed with Dewey—for it was either electricity to top success or else fall hopelessly behind—none laughed.

With progress came new problems.

Soon afterward, the Lord called Herbert home. One day he was still here and well, the next day he was gone. The Lord plucked day by day from Herbert's simple life until his time was up.

"A quiet, modest man," said Dewey with approval. He did, by then, all funerals. "The Lord be praised. No suffering."

"Death comes because God wills it so," sang the community of deep believers. Here was a man who passed away, as he had lived, with quiet, somber dignity, next to his maple syrup. While still alive, all loved him well enough.

Jan did his best to honor him in death, as he had honored him alive; he saw to it that Herb was taken to his grave in style and lowered in respectful silence. Lizzy sprinkled a handful of dust.

That week, Josie was on her best behavior. She put her best foot forward. She lent a hand without a murmur with the dishes, while Lizzy sat and wept for Herbert lavishly and watched the fading season—watched how the fog crept over the acres, watched how the first October snowstorm started powdering the roofs.

Noralee was a wide-awake sister. "You're hoping that a guest will come?"

"I want to be of use."

Pause. Heartfelt sighs. By the window sat Lizzy, unseeing. She, too, was young just yesterday. She hoped for a harmonious tomorrow.

Here was the balance sheet, enumerating Lizzy's ills: Arthritic knees. Short breath. Lapses in memory.

"Enjoy being old. You've earned it a hundred times over."

"Yes. That's what Herbert always said."

"The past is now the past," said Josephine. "He was a good, kind, honest man. He's dead now. He is gone. He lived an obscure life. Such life is not for everyone."

Lizzy pressed her lips together hard and swallowed a ready reply.

Little Melly served coffee in polka-dot cups that Josie had

recently bought from Sears-Roebuck—not going there herself to inspect and to compare, but ordering from catalogs as though Jan's money came like hay.

Feet on a heated brick, her knitting needles flying, Lizzy tried to heal herself from being snubbed by relatives because Jan's wife was still so quarrelsome, and no one liked to visit. She kept on reaching for her handkerchief, but still, no change in Josie.

Now Herbert was no more; she, Lizzy, on the sidelines. She longed to overwhelm her relatives with hospitality to show that, grief or not, she was as ever centered in her Lord. But after the initial flurry that follows every funeral—why, hardly anybody came to visit Lizzy any more.

Jan said to Lizzy, gently: "Mom, life goes on. Why don't you pack your suitcase? Go visit Winnipeg."

"Who wants a useless woman? It's just as Herbert said—"

It snowed upon Herb's grave. It rained upon Herb's grave. Her time was heavy on her hands, her eyelids still inflamed with weeping.

" You haven't seen the Dycks for years. Go. Take a small vacation."

" I guess I should. Well, next year. Maybe next year. It costs a lot."

"I can afford it, Mom."

"You've spent too much already. On Herbert's funeral."

"Don't even mention it."

"It pays to save, I always say. It's hardly worth that I should run a separate household—"

Josie unfolded her napkin, pinkie extended, as though she dined now with the Finkelsteins, downtown in Wichita, instead of having afternoon coffee with her mother-in-law, sister-in-law, husband and very close family friend.

Josie spoke as brightly as she could, after a long and swollen pause: "And, anyway, the latest word is that I'll soon have indoor plumbing, just like the Jews in Wichita—"

They had their antidote. The clan strolled down memory lane.

Remember the buffalo chips? Remember the year the potatoes froze in their buckets and all of our chickens succumbed? The year of the rampaging grippe? The lessons we learned? The hardships we endured? We learned how to eke out a sliver of soap. Let alone buy our soap cakes, perfumed.

Lost in her secret world, Josie stared out the window. Her face was blank. She was famished for knowledge and news.

"It's hard for me, these days, to climb the stairs to Bethel Church without assistance," hinted Lizzy. "But I can always count on Josie's helping hand. Right, Josie? Josephine?"

"*Ach ja*," sighed Noralee into the yawning silence. "If so you say, it must be true. *Ach ja*."

The young grew old. The old grew useless. Remember the corn stalks? Remember the stones, the marginal land, the locusts, the contrary Indians? Remember how Jan set the unhewn rafters? While Little Melly watched? Remember how we searched for nails to hang that Russian clock? How Herbert's oxen took us visiting on Sundays—clear across that bumpy road to Hillsboro?

Spade in hand, we took to the land. The roads—still unfinished. The bridge—yet unbuilt. And now you reap the blessings, the credit be always the Lord's. A winterized home. A babe every year, so we hope, Josephine. And money to spare for Christmas!

# Chapter 36

Hein grew a patriarchal beard. The harvest kept him busy.

"Come winter, then," Natasha said. She carefully studied the palm of his hand. "Just you remember, Hein. He who stops, rusts. I believe that."

He laughed at her. "You're telling me?"

He saw her once or twice, to tie up some loose ends. The chickens still cackled; Natasha still laughed. For weeks on end, he stayed away, but he was always back.

Winter came. Gray days set in. "The river," Natasha told a loyal friend, "turns into a mere trickle."

Hein practiced scales for church songs with Marleen. He wore a belt with buckles Marleen had given him. She leaned against him happily. Natasha poked about—just like a blind, abandoned kitten.

Natasha poured her heart out to the Gypsy. "What do you see? What is in store for me?"

"I see the shadow of a crow that falls upon a coffin."

"These days, it takes a mule to haul him in!" Natasha wailed unhappily.

"Try fasting," said the Gypsy.

"I did," wept Natasha. "I fasted till my hands shook. My waistline grows thicker and thicker."

"So he must know. Tell him at once, Natasha."

"He'll beat me!" howled Natasha. "He'll beat me black and blue."

"Go home, dumb girl," the housemaid told Natasha. "There is no need to show off your misfortune."

"No. I'll wait here."

"He is so busy, nowadays," the servant said, while casting scornful looks. "He scarcely knows himself."

"You tell him. Tell him I am here. Tell him that I feel faint." Natasha sat down, exhausted, on an overturned bucket, resting her hands on her knees. She blew her nose repeatedly, and tried to take deep breaths.

"Fool girl! You'd be lucky to merit a ladle of borscht."

She struck out at her tormentor but missed, so swam her eyes in tears. Natasha could barely bridle her sorrow, so mixed it was with wrath and worry and regret.

"Why did you come here?" Hein scowled when forced to face his own dishonor. "I asked you not to come. Did I not ask you not to come here any more, Natasha?"

The tears rushed to her voice: "It's too late. I now expect the worst."

Hein gnawed at the ends of his mustache. Natasha sat there on her bucket, wrung her hands, and gave free rein to tears.

Hein couldn't help himself; he stroked across her hair. "Well. Now. Let's see. What might be done? I recommend that you start looking for a husband."

"You loved me, and you promised me. Can you deny you did?"

"All that is past."

"For me, you have no mercy?"

"Once my mind has been made up, why would I want to change it?"

"What priest will marry me?" she wept, cradling her belly with fluttering hands. "What man would want spoiled goods?"

"I'll help you search," he offered, and twirled his mustache thoughtfully.

Hein called on Ivan, the newly bonded village herdsman.

"Five rubles," Hein replied, delivering a clever speech. Though he was young, not even twenty years of age, he had a head for business.

"Too little," sniffed Ivan. "Just think. What will the neighbors say?"

"A strip of pasture—fenced! I'm willing to add to the bargain."

"Your name! Imagine the disgrace!"

"Here. Take this flint. A goat?"

Ivan took the flint and sniffed it several times before he let it glide into his pocket. "And all the spiteful tongues. A goat and six fat chickens?"

"Would you like to see me ruined?"

"A cow?"

"And a calf."

"A cart?"

"Plus a wheelbarrow, too."

"Well, come to think of it—"

"Better sign here now," said Hein quickly. He was a prudent man; he had a document in hand. "See what it says? You'll yet make a pauper of me."

Ivan, a shepherd in need of delousing, smacked the bottom of his vodka bottle with the flat of his left hand. "All right. All right. Why not? A cross is good enough?" He was a coarse and uncouth fellow but with a sullen loyalty. The cork popped out and danced into a corner. "Just one last small request. Perhaps a pair of boots?"

"The finest pair of boots," said Hein. "Brand new. The finest leather I can find. And treat her well. That is my one demand."

"Make sure they squeak," said Ivan.

"I'll spit in your face," howled Natasha, rotund.

Hein sat and cracked his knuckles, waiting out the storm. "Shout all you like. There's nothing more to say."

"You took my heart and tore it out."

"Why did you trust the Gypsy?"

"I trusted you. Did I not trust you fully?"

"Don't play such sorry tricks on me. You made a bad mistake. Ivan is not that bad. He says he'll marry you."

She refused with a hot flow of tears. "The dog bites him! The goat hates him!" shrieked Natasha.

Hein studied the tips of his fingers.

"And his lice?" wept Natasha.

"Just strip him, put his clothes in the oven and bake them for an hour."

Hein walked off, hands in his pockets, and left her sitting there. Through floods of tears, Natasha saw her future had a blueprint now that not the deftest saint could change. She wept until her anger melted.

Her belly swelled and swelled. Her tantrums subsided. Compliant shudders shook her frame.

Hein's confidence grew; his comfort increased. The four Gospels were welcome again.

In the end, Natasha gave in: "I am now at the end of my rope."

"I'll let you do some chores around the house," he offered in return. "You'll earn some extra kopecks. I'll put you in charge of the geese. I'll sneak you this and that."

"Is that the truth? You won't forget?"

"You have my word. Why would I lie to you?"

She looked at him, exhausted. "It's your child, too, you know."

"I know."

"Just so you know."

"I know. Have I ever denied that, Natasha?"

"You have. You have."

"But not to you."

"So, then? I am waiting for something to happen."

"I'll let you light the fires. I'll let you wind the clocks. I'll let your husband scrub the drinking trough and pay him handsomely. That way, you won't go wanting—"

"And meanwhile, you and I—"

There was a brief but heavy pause. Hein cleared his throat and promised: "I'll see you now and then."

"He stinks," she argued weakly, to have the last word and save face. Hein stroked her neck. "Good girl. Good girl. I'll send him to the steam bath every month."

Natasha settled for reality. A sensible woman, at last she gave in, but not without first dropping hints of trouble yet to come. She gave her hair an extra careful combing with tiny dabs of butter, slicked it down across the ears, and settled for Ivan.

She said: "I'd rather step a small rung down than stay an old maid at the top."

Hein summoned an Orthodox priest: "This is Ivan. And this, Natasha."

First, the priest scolded, then he married them to quench the buzz of gossip. Natasha kissed the crucifix. She had expected better than to have to settle for a herdsman, but she would get herself a brand new saint, and let the rest be jealous.

Marleen beamed a triumphant smile. She wore stiff lace cuffs on her dress and an embroidered collar, both virtue and victory hers. She searched her heart and found benevolence and generosity: that came with having won.

"Luck. Double luck. And triple luck," intoned the priest and swung his censor hard.

Ivan sneezed lustily. Hein guffawed while Marleen gave the new bride the triple Easter kiss, since it was close to Easter and her heart was light and free.

Natasha blinked away her tears. "This marriage will remove all doubt," she offered timidly. "Marleen, let me ask this. Will

you now have a laugh against me?"

Marleen replied, an earnest Christian: "I'll never laugh at your misfortune. That much I promise you."

Her wedding date to Hein was entered firmly in the Elders' ledgers. What was one muzhik, more or less? She would bear many sons and daughters—offspring beyond comparison.

The priest wrapped up his incantations.

Natasha sniveled.

Ivan glowed.

Hein tied the couple's hands together with his red-checkered handkerchief. He told them they could keep it.

"The best of luck," said Hein, relieved. He let the newlyweds pick several of his piglets to start a modest household.

A little later, a vermin-ridden monk arrived at the imperial gardens to shed his rags and fix his eye upon the palace. His name was Grigorij Rasputin. Sandals made of bark and stolen twine hung on his unwashed feet. His nails were black with grime. Dirty strands of hair fell to his ears. He cursed, told purple jokes, and had atrocious table manners.

He claimed that he could tame the wildest horse.

He spiced his tongue with peppery profanities. He crushed a frog with his flat hand.

By meditation, he proclaimed, he had arrived at universal truths. Through prayer, he insisted, he had acquired powers to drive away bad luck.

Some said that the holy man was Lucifer, disguised, but not a few insisted that he was a saint, a prophet sent to earth. Still others said of this: "The very thought is ludicrous."

"A man of the people," cried many, gullible and credulous. "He's worthy of our trust."

Soon, swarms of girls of casual virtue sought him out. He showed them how to dance: with total and joyful abandon, arms spread wide, swinging back their skirts and kicking up their heels. He leaned into the dusk and played the balalaika while they danced. They felt at ease with him—he spoke their spicy lan-

guage.

They took to him their maladies: "Will you please feel my heart? It makes a hollow sound."

He next expelled a demon that had plagued a damsel of the gentry, and thereby spread his fame. They came to him, these shallow, idle females, hands buried in their sable muffs. They looked at him beneath their lowered lashes: "A would-be ravisher, perhaps?"

"All is forgivable," the monk said with a belch, "and, therefore, nothing is forbidden."

The icon lamps kept flickering. The palace lay in slumber.

"When you are thirsty," said the monk, "you will awake from deepest sleep." He looked at them and smiled: they were but silver darts that quivered on his hook.

"Let's cover the icons," he said softly. His gestures were like water lilies growing quietly on the slime. "You. You. And you and you and you. I bid you kneel before me, before we settle down to love."

They said of him in awe: "A man of God. A real man of God."

His name began to ring in the medieval city of the tsars.

One day, he fixed a pinpoint stare upon the Winter Palace, then said in a low whisper: "When I decide, the Emperor will have an heir. But when I die, the throne will fall with me."

At first, the courtiers laughed: words spoken by a drunken babbler. It was no secret that the timid Emperor sired only useless girls. The German Empress taught them fancy needlepoint. The nannies spoke to them in German.

But then, to all's surprise, a baby boy was born, a child with thin lips and wide cornflower eyes.

"A primrose baby," said the Empress. "This child will bring nothing but joy."

It was a wondrous world, that year; blue the sky and soft the clouds; young people fell in love; oldsters died in peace; tulips stood in bloom. Apanlee was bursting at the seams with far-

flung, watchful cousins. The Elders preached their Sunday sermons to open doors and windows. The countryside was bountiful. The orchards swarmed with bees. Spring drew the sap up from the earth; it surged up to the tree tops. The field hands oiled their pruning shears. The Elders, to a voice, beseeched the Holy Ghost to bless the monarchy.

A darling, this imperial child, much wanted and much-longed-for.

The cannons thundered their salute. The German Empress lay there, pale and wan, replete with a small smile and a hot water bottle. The tsar knelt by her bed and looked the baby over. It bled a little at the navel. He pulled a scented handkerchief to blot the tiny spot.

"What's this?" he asked with a proud laugh. He held the stained cloth aloft as if it were a trophy. "Already up to mischief?"

At once, the red droplet returned. He blotted, carefully, again.

The tsar drove Russia to useless war. The papers claimed the fault lay with the Japanese; the Japanese objected angrily; additional details were harder to come by. The cannons boomed. The shrapnel crackled. The country bled. Two armies moved on one another. Somewhere, a banker laughed.

Halley's Comet came and went. For a long, brittle summer, the clouds withheld their moisture.

For the peasants, this meant hardship. For the merchants, business slumped.

But for the folks at Apanlee, all this was of no consequence, for Apanlee had forged its soul, by then, by trusting in His word.

If things went well, He took the credit. If things went badly, now and then, it was a test of Faith. You put your trust in the good Lord; He never punished you without good cause—if chastising was called for, that purified your soul and cleansed you of trespasses.

You lived, if you were part of Apanlee, both for the privilege and the duty of bringing scented bread loaves to the table—and

when you died, what did that mean? Not much.

You slept beneath a wooden cross until His trumpets' call would rouse you to glory—rouse you to rhapsody and splendor greater yet than anyone could comprehend.

And, meanwhile, every Elder preached—and no one disagreed!—you had your duties, one by one, and if you did them, one by one, that translated to joy. Joy sprang from harmony, which came from discipline. Joy meant good neighbors living within wave and shout of one another; it meant the shine of hoes, pitch forks and sickles being readied for the wheat.

It was so simple. Earnest. Clean. It was a potent elixir. It took a robust man to steer the plow that turned the soil that grew the grain that fed the world you knew. It took a worthy woman to stir the yeast to bake the bread that fed your children and their children's children and then their children's children, too.

And if a willing couple—between them holding values honed to gloss by centuries of ethnic strength—chose to unite in holy matrimony and to the benefit of land and kin and tsars—why, that was Hallelujah time and yet more Hallelujah time for all!

There came a ghastly pogrom. It came in the wake of a plot. There was no escaping the Cossacks. Not since the times of the Cossack uprisings more than two centuries ago had such blood purges raged as were now unleashed on the Valley of Jews.

The howling rabbis shaved their beards and hid in barns and attics, but mounted sentries of the Crown charged village after village and pried at them with bayonets, digging through the straw. The guilty and the innocent hid in cellars, under beds, in closets and in sheds, but still the sentries pulled them out and battered them, until the victims spat out broken teeth and wailed for mercy, which was rare, or death, which followed swiftly.

It was an ancient conflict—part of the country's tapestry.

Did ever someone ask: how can you tell the good Jew from the bad? If so, the question drowned in the tumult as rifles crashed against the doors. You knew a Jew. By his profile: that's how you knew. If that was not enough to tell, you checked by pulling

down his trousers—if need be, by the flicker of a candle.

But take account: it wasn't just the tsars. It wasn't just the German settlers who held corrosive attitudes—and least of all the ones who lived and sowed the seed of Apanlee. In truth, it barely touched them where they lived, and where they hoped to die.

Here was the universal sentiment: a different breed; down through the centuries, so were they known, a devious breed, a plotting tribe. Not one of them paid honor to the Crown.

In the declining years of the last century and several years into the next, this was the universal puzzlement: what was it with the Jews, discounting that they made you shiver?

If you sought out a malcontent, odds were it was a Jew.

Just point a finger at a Jew, and you were pointing it to someone who had tricked someone somewhere.

You noticed, furthermore, that they were always looking left and right, as though afraid of being caught. If innocent they were, why be clandestine, pray? The tsars, though known as fair and trusting monarchs, had never trusted them. The tsars had had no choice but take the culprits to the pits of execution—where they received their due. What if they sobbed while pulling out their sidelocks? While being broken on the rack, their tangled shame emerged.

So with these latest strikes. So with this newest plot.

The mortal enemies of Christ, disguised as beggars in the cities, kept thrusting leaflets and pushing discontent into the hands of passersby.

It happened more and more. It happened everywhere.

Yet all the while, the folks of Apanlee stayed clear of the festering conflict. Their task was to speed progress by buying farm machinery to better serve the soil they loved, the Crown they honored, and the Lord they revered as the ultimate judge. Such riches as they had, acquired honestly by diligence of generations—who dared to say: the Devil's way? Who dared to

say: that kind of wealth is wrong?

Behind them lay a century of sowing, harrowing and reaping, swinging their scythes in mighty half-arches, binding and stacking and loading. Their way of life had stood the test of time. That proved that it was sound.

The Elders told the congregation, as in past centuries: "Remain apart. Keep pure the pool of kin."

Thrift. Order. Hard work. Diligence.

Time wasted—wasted opportunities.

Once do we pass through life. Since journey we must, since struggle we must, nothing is sweeter than work, nothing more precious than God's golden kernels.

Wasted minutes add up to an hour. Hours soon total to days.

And squandered days are like the feathers of a carelessly ripped down comforter—once scattered to the winds, no way to bring them back.

# Chapter 37

Ivan gave Natasha a moderate beating.

"If it's a boy," she shrieked, now checked but not defeated, "he'll be a ticket inspector! If a girl, a needle worker! I'll see to that! You mark my word, you smelly oaf! You hear?"

"You are the greatest simpleton on earth." A three-day stubble on his chin, Ivan fell asleep, his head upon the table, content with life and luck. Natasha moved her icons back and forth, to give them ample light.

"You two. Have you been gossiping about me?" asked Hein the following week when he came visiting. Hein came to visit often. He came with a thundering rap at the door. They sat together peacefully.

"Let her deny it if she can. This woman here? As faithful as your shadow."

Natasha hissed at him: "For heaven's sakes, be quiet." She glanced at Hein—arched eyebrows, that was all. All three broke into laughter. Ivan slammed his fist down on the table. "What's done is done. I close my eyes. What else is there to say? Perhaps a tiny favor?"

"What do you want? Speak up," asked Hein, and slapped him hard across his back so that his shoulders shook. "Stop hinting. Speak your mind."

In olden days, if any serf dared speak against the well-established order it meant the knout, and sometimes death. If land was sold, the serf was sold; and now? Here sat Natasha, implanted with the seed of Apanlee, and was there punishment? Nobody said a word.

"Once freedom comes to Russia—" Ivan said, belching softly, and let the words hang in the air. Should Revolution ever come, the handy knowledge of the bargain struck between Hein and Natasha would be a weapon in his fist. But that's where Ivan stopped.

Hein spoke complacently. "What? Not in a hundred years. What is it now? You want my boots?"

Ivan looked at him slant-wise. "Not just your boots. Your sheepskin, too—"

Yet in the deeper parts of his nature, Ivan knew his limits. So, for that matter, did Natasha. He had already called down every fiery curse he knew upon her for her unseemly ways, for she was nothing but a peasant girl, born into endless squalor. Already, he had bloodied her to gain the upper hand in his rude hut; now here she was, just beaming her approval. "I like your mustache, Hein," she told him smilingly. Her eyes were glistening with glee.

Natasha, too, had listened with attention to the endless talk that had it of the bottom rising in the future to the top, the top collapsing to the bottom, once Revolution came. Such chatter never ended; it never went away.

"You do? You really like my mustache?" Hein told her, speaking friend to friend, that he had plans to cultivate it lovingly into an upsweep masterpiece to rival an old Prussian nobleman whose portrait hung above his bed.

"A show-off, right?" said she.

The tacit understanding between Ivan, Hein and Natasha

didn't change as the time of her confinement drew nearer.

"What else?" asked Hein, accommodatingly, for labor took its time. "A hay cart? A bucket? Don't tell me that you want a horse."

"We hate to be hurried," said she while lying, panting, in the straw. "A discard mare, perhaps? A roof for the family cow?"

Her husband came in handy. Had he been less content with how things were and surely would remain, he might have kicked her, might have cuffed her, had she been on her feet. But she was not; this birth was hard on her; Natasha suffered quite a bit. He even offered her his thumb. "Here. Bite it as hard as you like." Crude and barefoot though he was, when it came to the basics, he never turned the tables. Perhaps he asked himself: "After the horse has been stolen, what is the point of burning the stable?" He might have simply been a muzhik of good will. All he grasped now was this: if he, Ivan, pulled out a bottle and settled down to joviality and shouts of "Bottoms up!" Hein felt too guilty and too mortified not to do likewise, even louder: "Bottoms up! Hey, everybody! Bottoms up!"

Meanwhile, Marleen spread Uncle Benny's shredded bulletins along the entrance of their hut to deaden the noise of a difficult birth. She stuffed the holes along the walls with Uncle Benny's chiding editorials about the haves and have-nots to keep the stray cats out.

"Hear me! Hear me! The sky's the limit!" Natasha shrieked. Hein waited nearby, pipe in his mouth. By then, he was bewhiskered like a schnauzer.

"Do you need anything, Natasha? Are you just about done with your struggle, Natasha?"

Natasha lay perspiring in the straw, although the roof was silvery with frost. "I am as eager as you for tomorrow!"

"Be glad you weren't singled out for spinsterhood," said he, a patient man. "What can I get you next, Natasha?"

"Were you a cat, I'd brandish you by your own tail. I'd smash your head against a rock!" screamed Natasha.

This was her opportunity; she made the most of it. Tomorrow was tomorrow; it would come soon enough. She would fall back again, tomorrow, on the laconic ways that marked her stock and kin, but now she shrieked with rage and pain, as loudly as she could, as often as she needed, Hein's old, discarded sheepskin pulled up hard against her chin.

"Your heart is black with discontent," said Hein, while waiting patiently. "You're making an infernal noise. You want to wake the neighbors?"

She gasped with wrath. She had momentum of her own and rode it to exhaustion. She knew that it was now or never to cast aside her inhibitions. To shriek with her betrayal, as loudly as she could, was only natural. Natasha shrieked her ire until she lost her breath.

"Now, take it easy. Tell me when. Just tell me when," Marleen demanded, long-backed, serene, her fingers stiff with cold. Her presence opened eyes. Such dignity. There are still people living to this day who will attest that she was there, to watch Natasha bear the bastard, to help and criticize.

Explanations come to mind, but none of them suffices. All who knew Marleen in her youth tell you there was no bravado. The greatness that would mark her life came later.

So we are left to guess. Could it have been mere tolerance that came with having won? Or might Marleen have been a saintly Christian who turned the other cheek? Perhaps she asked herself: what do I need but Jesus?

Could be. She must have surely suffered.

But on the other hand, she had the stoicism of her ancestry in her. She was a pious soul, that much we know—her roots deep in the Gospel. Restrained in all she did, she struck a righteous stance but did not drop a single word that would reveal her feelings. Her pinkie kept twitching and twitching; that's how her husband knew. What else was she to do? The village midwife, meanwhile, lit the stove with nimble fingers. Her bosom rose with doom.

At last, Natasha bore a son. Marleen, her lips compressed, washed the infant's pinched visage with the rich milk of Apanlee.

"Be glad it's over, Natasha," said Marleen. "A tadpole. Now, are you satisfied?"

Natasha's heart felt light with the release. She made herself as small as possible. "Can money repay me?" wheedled Natasha. "No. Nothing. Not a thing. Just a small goat, maybe, Marleen?"

"A goat? Did you say a goat?" The triumph of her challenger was gall.

"A shaggy goat, that's all."

"You swear?"

From now on, life would be like fishing in a barrel filled with carp. "I swear."

"You'll get a goat," promised Marleen. "Swear by your patron saint. Your mulishness is known."

"That's all. I swear upon my favorite icon." Natasha sank back in the straw. This was her finest hour. Since she'd survived this birth, she knew she could survive most anything. "Just hand me that soaked towel to cool my swollen eyes."

"Here. Careful now. Your husband and my husband heard you. You're sure a goat, and nothing more? That's all?"

*"Ja. Ja.* For now, that's all." Natasha was a clever student; she'd gathered here and there some snatches of High German. No longer was she pale with terror. Now she could dip into the handy fountainhead of motherhood, as often as she needed—a source as filling as hot corn. "I put my trust in God," Natasha said, reflectively, "that you will treat me fairly."

"You have my word."

"I could use a small cart, Marleen. To pick the fodder for the goat I am about to get."

Marleen turned her eyes heavenward, or else toward the ceiling. "By hook or crook, that's how."

"And why not? By and by."

A small, beguiling smile lit up Natasha's face. She had her own defenses—if all else failed, a tantrum now and then.

"Now hold your tongue; you are a glutton," Hein roared, to

cover up his pride.

It had happened. Life went on.

At the core, there might have been discord; there never was corrosion. Whatever the reason, whatever the motive, an understanding had been forged.

As years piled upon years, there was much bickering. There were sly ploys. As often as not, there was quick-flaring anger. When Hein drove either of his women in ways that pleased him more than them, the fur began to fly.

But all in all, both women bore the troika's yoke with mute tenacity. It worked; each knew her place; there was no basic conflict. Natasha always wore Marleen's discarded dresses until they fell apart—but not without a lecture from Marleen. To enter through the back door was no problem; it opened into Marleen's heated kitchen all the same. She could snoop there; her rival was snoozing; she could thaw her feet out by the pot-bellied stove.

Natasha reasoned cleverly: if she worked hard, kept to herself, avoided being quarrelsome, and did what she was told, she had no need for conflict. So what if she was shouted at? It didn't happen often—and when it happened, she grew sullen, deaf and dumb, which gave Marleen a headache.

When she was sent to run an errand, Natasha went—but at her speed, in her good time, and like as not, with the umbrella Hein had given to Marleen. To own that fine umbrella was the height of aspiration, to keep from getting wet when thunderstorms arrived—but probably asking too much.

"I have a feeling deep inside that all this has happened to somebody else," Marleen confided quietly to Dorothy, with whom she was best friends.

To the misbegotten child she said as often as she could: "You ugly creature you. A ticket inspector? Don't make me laugh. You're as good as a pickpocket already."

The baby, meanwhile, kicked and spit and howled, and every time Natasha saw a priest, she held her son up to be blessed.

Natasha called the infant Dominik, named for a favorite icon. She told the saint named Dominik that she forgave him, though he had failed her miserably.

"How could you? How could you?" she chided. "Did I not trust you fully?"

The saint smiled back at her with clear and vacant smiles. She gave him a resounding kiss. She was a practical woman; she knew she might need him again.

Her young heart swelled with pride.

Hein came around from time to time to check the hut in need of thatching, or else to scold Ivan for small trespasses. "Sit down. Sit down," Natasha cried, as ever on the lookout for bonanzas.

At first, she welcomed Hein with eagerness, for there was peat smoke in his eyes—and throw precaution to the winds! She sat him down, pulled off his boots, and heated up the samovar. The visits were no secret. Sometimes Ivan would leave both of them alone, and sometimes not: it didn't matter much to Hein, nor to Natasha, either.

For quite a while, Hein visited with fire in his loins, but in good time, he cooled from holiday to holiday; it happened of itself.

All parties were content.

Hein never lost Natasha's friendship. She never lost his genuine goodwill. She combed his hair and beard; she trimmed his fingernails; the toddler they both owned would climb up on his knees. She sat and watched and grated her potatoes in a dish, chipped all around sufficiently to have warranted thieving it from under Marleen's eyes.

"Don't spit on him, you naughty boy!" Natasha scolded Dominik.

She tried her best to teach some manners to her son, but that was easier said than done. She brushed his lips with Ivan's vodka—to quiet him.

Hein was a patient man with any child; he was so with this

youngster. When he was in a mirthful mood, he gave Dominik galloping piggyback rides.

"A rascal," Hein said proudly, and cuffed him on both ears.

"When he grows up," Natasha bragged on more than one occasion, "he'll seek the company of talented and learned people."

Hein laughed uproariously. "What? What?"

She argued on her son's behalf. "His toes do not curl inwards. That means that he is smart."

"It does? Well. We shall see." Hein smiled at her approvingly. She smiled right back, albeit through a tear. She knew that she looked pretty while smiling through a tear.

"You will make sure? When he grows up, you will make sure he'll travel in compartments filled with padded benches?"

"I will?"

"You will. I know you will make sure."

"I'll see what I can do."

"He will be a ticket inspector. To the end of his natural life."

Ivan broke into roaring laughter and slapped Hein on both knees. What next? No limits to her dreams?

"In olden days," Hein shouted gleefully, "I could have sent her to Siberia for her pains."

The olden days were gone. The future smiled on them.

"Take me," Ivan said boastingly, still sitting on a dented pail, exchanging banter with the head of Apanlee while nursing an infected foot. "This is the modern age."

Fresh oats for the horses. Fresh milk from the udder. A wish, barely uttered—fulfilled!

He had no quarrel whatsoever with the unfolding century, and neither did Natasha. She knew that Hein was satisfied; so was Ivan; come push to shove, so was Marleen. In olden, bygone days when serfs were serfs and masters masters, Hein could have flogged her, sold her, even thrown her into prison—nobody would have cried a tear.

Modernity was on the march; the olden days were gone.

Young love had fallen on Natasha's heart, with the sudden force of thunderbolts—but now she felt sedate and tranquil; she gently shut her doors. Marleen, when in a wrecking mood, might holler to her heart's content, but given the odds, and counting the choices, what else was there to do?

Hein was providing well enough, and there was room for all.

Hein liked the restive youngster. He tickled him and tossed him high into the air. By the time his second spring thaw came around, the infant, growing rapidly, made a sure dash for him.

Marleen said little, then or later, except perhaps to Dorothy. Self-discipline did not permit her hate; but neither did it nurture love; and in the interim, she trained herself to self-respect; she trained her heart with songs she learned each Wednesday afternoon at female sing-alongs where she sang harmony. She had a small but trilling voice; she practiced every week. When a friend or a relative died, nobody sang with more feeling.

"Who is Natasha, after all?" was how she summed it up. "Debased as an old kopeck." A false spring was just that—a brief inflammation of nature. From that had come a child—and what an ugly toad!

This boy with his small, beady eyes was clearly a mistake, an irritant. By contrast, she herself was firmly grounded in the seasons. By then, Marleen was having baby after baby of her own, and all of them were fat.

Uncle Benny watched these family developments attentively. He noticed: the soothsayers' eyes did not blink.

The cripple had not changed at all—still frail, still cultured, still reading to himself, all the time. He still saved envelopes from almost any nation; sometimes he slept on them. The scent of fresh-cut hay still made him slightly dizzy, but Dorothy was there, on standby, with hot tea.

Bespectacled and pale, with rheumatism bending every aching joint, he kept on worrying his brittle documents through all the years that followed. The secret of his background lay forgotten: those eager to make sure the scandal never died had died

themselves, by then.

In his own way, he was a busy man. Publishing the weekly *Voice of Peace* took two days, sometimes three; on other days, he went for walks with friends—friends who arrived at Apanlee from every corner of the empire, all worldly gentlemen. They came from Orenburg and Zaparoshe, as well as from St. Petersburg. They told each other many times, as they sipped honeyed tea at Apanlee:

"The man who has two horses should willingly relinquish one."

It was a tiresome refrain: "Unless reform—then Revolution."

Nobody paid any attention—not even Natasha; not even Ivan. For these two stalwart souls, and with them Dominik, to live in peace and plenty was enough.

They wintered, and they summered, like everybody else.

If Dominik was naughty, Natasha and Marleen, both shrieking like two shrews, would chase him down the street.

Soon after Dominik was born, Marleen gave birth to freckled twins. Such was the joy of Apanlee that even Natasha was feasting on stir-fried potatoes.

This happened on a gray and melancholy day. Hein named the two infants Yuri and Sasha, beside himself with pride. "Hear, you foul-smelling muzhik!" he bragged to Ivan. "Everything double. Blue eyes. Blond hair. Strong hands. Square feet."

Natasha glared daggers at Hein. Her face turned red with rivalry. She spoke from jealousy: "Why two, I wonder? One isn't enough? Is there no limit to your greed?"

Hein laughed and cuffed Natasha playfully: "The doctors ordered bedrest for Marleen. I do not want her thin and nervous. How would you like to come and help out in the nursery? "

And what a stroke of luck!

Natasha simply could not spurn such golden opportunity. She played a little hard-to-get to savor every nuance. Inwardly, she was jumping at the chance.

"As if I haven't work enough with mine."

"Consider it an open offer," Hein told her laughingly. "You can refill your plate as often as you like."

She took the *Voice of Peace* and swatted Hein to keep a fly away. "What am I? A black market piglet?"

The truth was already well known. Hein was a man with the voracity that marked a man; Marleen had painful spasms in her back and stubborn headaches throbbing at her temples; the headaches stayed; they wouldn't go away. Trustworthy bonesetters arrived from Alexanderwohl to check her chronic malady. They counseled her repeatedly: "Perhaps you need more sleep?"

Marleen confided quietly to Dorothy, who wrung her tiny hands: "My heart is as still as the grave."

She spoke so softly, by that time, that Dorothy concluded, worriedly, that cottage cheese was all Marleen could eat, and still hold down, when the migraines struck full force. How could she match Hein's ardor?

Marleen put up as brave a front as possible. She kept her eyes downcast. She told her husband quietly: "Do what you must. I won't be in the way."

Hein felt released and gratified. Had he been more demonstrative, he might have worshipped her; he certainly adored the twins she had presented him. Hein propped her up within her feather pillows to get a better view.

Marleen sat there with pounding heart. "She will not have a laugh against me?"

He shook his head, a patient man: impossible to penetrate her feelings.

"You mean it? Tell me now." Pointedly, Natasha stared down the narrow path where she and Hein had walked.

"I'm certain," said Marleen, dusting a speck from her skirt. "I'm thinking of the ups and downs of measles. I'll need you then. You might as well start practicing."

"You won't change your mind?"

No one had said it would be easy, but things not easy still needed to be done. "No. I gave you my word. My word is my

word."

Natasha gnawed her lower lip. She had a rounded bottom. Besides, she still coveted an umbrella of her own. "What are you—in a melting mood? I do not understand."

"An offer is an offer. It's offered honestly."

Natasha looked confused and flushed; in fact, her face was scarlet. Beside her, Dominik was struggling with the hiccupss that ended in a nosebleed more often than she liked.

"But why?"

Marleen chose not to answer. Instead, she merely said: "My babies are unspoiled. They will eat anything."

There was a long and heavy pause. Marleen looked up at last and held Natasha's glance: "Tell me. Does he still ask?"

"Ask? Not only has he forgotten," cried Natasha, now eager to please and placate. "I have forgotten to listen."

"Natasha, tell me everything."

"There's naught to tell. It's over."

"Here's an apron. Here's the feather duster. Here, take this slice of soap. It's settled, then. You'll start tomorrow morning. Just keep that red blouse buttoned."

# Chapter 38

Natasha was elated. She was a good domestic—nobody doubted that. Indeed, so overcome was she with gratitude that, had not Marleen been her contender, she would have worshipped her. She decidedly worshipped the twins—who had, by then, between them sixteen pearly teeth with not a single gap.

She squirreled away discarded socks and mittens for Dominik, who arched his back and howled. To quiet him, she fed him the finest leftovers—on holidays, zwieback and raisin bread, sweet tea and boiled chicken. Natasha nearly purred; she was that happy and content. Marleen was ill again; propped up by several pillows, she spoke of blinding flashes. If there were barbecues at Apanlee to celebrate the grain, Natasha served the kvas.

She listened to Marleen—to every nuance of her maladies and illnesses—with an altogether sympathetic ear. "A glutton, isn't he?" she said, which made for oblique sisterhood.

That's how it was for years.

This odd arrangement pleased Ivan as well. He felt cheerful enough to relinquish Natasha part-time; she was a nag; she

nagged and nagged; she whined the rain leaked down the chimney.

"Do this! Do that! Get up! Come down from that oven!"

That was Natasha, nagging him, when all he craved was sleep in the warm niche atop baked bricks when the November snows arrived.

Years piled up on years; he and Natasha continued to argue. For quarreling, there was no end at times—the door wouldn't close, the hay needed cutting, the roof needed fixing again. Inflamed by alcohol, he pounded her face with his fist. At times, he beat Natasha hard enough so that she started spitting blood. Sometimes she hit him back.

"It's all your fault!" was Ivan't shout.

"Your fault!" Natasha would shout back.

Not that she lacked her own defenses. She had them, and she used them to the hilt. Natasha's high-pitched shrieks would soon bring Marleen running with a broom to ward the drunkard off. Later, she'd press a towel soaked in vinegar against Natasha's blackest bruise.

That's how Natasha knew Marleen was on her side. "You brute!" Marleen would shriek, in fury. In gratitude, Natasha nearly swooned.

"Say what you will. It's all my fault. I make him wild, Marleen."

"He's violent. He's vile."

"Just now and then, Marleen."

That gleeful smile of hers when she came back from Apanlee! It drove Ivan to drink. When he had peered too deeply into his vodka glass, and when Natasha smiled and smiled, that's how the trouble usually began.

Meanwhile, their door had fallen from its hinges; their windowpanes were cracked; Ivan had no nails; he lost his hammer; the wind blew viciously. He often slept, his clothes on, in the straw in one of Hein's sheds where the horses were kept, while the vodka faded from his head. The only sign of life, his beard

would heave and fall.

This called for unity. Natasha took him by the legs; Hein took him by the shoulders; Marleen would run to get the gate, and Dorothy just wrung her hands—high drama all around! All pushed, coaxed, heaved and shoved Ivan atop his oven where he lay comatose for days.

"You! Don't blame others for your own misfortunes," Natasha told her husband many times. His corn stood lower than his weeds; his fields were full of thistles; the grain was threadbare; the haulms were much too short. "The Cossacks ought to rip your nostrils!" She called him names that burned.

He squinted at his meager acres—too small for worthwhile harvesting "He wants you there at night to seal his glee? So go! What's it to me?"

That was precisely what she did; she benefitted handsomely; so did Marleen, and so did Hein; the pipe just never left his mouth; all benefitted mightily.

"The day will come," she said, her eyes on Dominik, "when that boy will wear jackets and trousers that match."

"Sure. When roosters start to whistle," Ivan offered angrily before he fell asleep.

Natasha didn't fret. It was quiet, warm and clean at Apanlee, where not a single door hinge squeaked, where embers always glowed. The winter relatives arrived and stayed an entire season, exchanging faded photographs. Natasha wore the apron.

Resourcefully, Natasha fit herself into the quilt of Apanlee. There, she had sweeping powers in the nursery, as well as other liberties as long as she practiced restraint. In fair exchange, she saw to it that each of Marleen's freckled youngsters, one by one, had only blissful dreams.

As often as she wished, in turn, Natasha could fill up her cart with Hein's leftover hay. Hein trusted her implicitly to have his best at heart. He knew that she was honest. While she might steal a sausage end for Dominik, she would never have taken a kopeck.

Natasha throve on other benefits as well. Marleen might well have pelted her with stones, had she not been a Christian, and of the finest kind. Instead, she kept warm borscht right on the stove the day Natasha limped in from the cold, chilled head to toe from having queued all day.

"Here. Have another bowl. I needed that special embroidery yarn to finish my last doily."

Natasha sat and slurped her borscht and did not say a word.

Marleen stood, silent, by the window. Outside, the world was gray on gray; the rain blew horizontally. Let winter come: she was well fortified; she wore her double underwear and woolen socks besides.

"I always meant to tell you—" said Marleen next, but then bit off the thought.

Natasha kept her silence likewise. Each spoonful filled her more until she had enough.

When in a tantalizing mood, she flaunted her chain of unbreakable beads. The Apanlee feast days showed in her waist; her bosom grew wider and wider.

She bit into huge chunks of cheese whenever fancy struck her—cheese chunks the size of Hein's thumb. She made sure her son took his Saturday bath—as often as not, in the family tub, in the leftover family suds.

Small concession, she knew, to gently close the doors when Marleen found herself deep in the throes of yet another migraine. Natasha even shushed the kitchen maids, and no one said a word.

That she did, to show her good will. She did it also—no one knew!—because she took the chance to steal a hard-boiled egg to deepen the color of Dominik's cheeks.

"Better than cabbage soup, borscht and black kasha. That's what I always say," she said to Dominik.

The youngster had his father's steely eyes above his mother's Slavic cheeks. When mail came from America—for Cousin Josie still shipped poetry for Uncle Benny's benefit—he ran to fetch the letters.

With chill nights came the measles, mumps and chicken pox. These were Natasha's finest hours. The babies needed her—their fevers made them weepy. She spent her nights at Apanlee, ready to rise the moment they turned weepy and rock away their ills.

She was fond of them all, but the twins stole her heart. The twins were her natural tonic when she was torn between two worlds, not knowing where to place her feet, still dressed in sandals made of bark. She loved them as her own. She knew her share of antidotes to calm the little look-alikes and make their fevers drop.

Albeit younger than her son, the twins grew fast—they outgrew shirts and socks and trousers. Natasha took the discards home, proud of both cloth and workmanship. And no one said a word.

When she took walks along the edge of Apanlee, a freckled youngster on each hand, the admiration others paid her was enough. She kicked up the dust with her sandals and bragged:

"Look what I have here. Look. As alike as two peas in a pod. And you think I can't tell the two apart?"

"Life is a party, eh, Natasha?" the jealous field hands sneered.

For Hein, now married solidly and getting thickset in the chin, this was the perfect compromise.

He was not good. He was not bad. He was a product of his times. He authorized most anything, chiefly congregation funds. Because he gave his share, and more—he gave and gave as though he sought to buy a place in heaven to match his place on earth—the Elders tipped their hats.

Had there been serious challenge to Hein's way of life, he would have given all he had to set himself aright, but by that time, the past was done; the future fixed; the Elders deemed that what was good for Hein was good for them as well: the wheels of Apanlee meshed smoothly. There was enough for all—leftovers for Natasha.

Like all his ancestors before him, Hein loved to work the

land. He was a robust farmer. For him, as for his neighbors, life was one ceaseless round of plowing, harrowing and sowing, growing harvests. He rose at dawn, worked all day long, and came back after sunset, his overflow of energy still palpable, as often as not in an amorous mood.

Marleen despised Hein's lustiness. She passed for a humorless woman. As Hein would sometimes say when in a mocking mood, it was impossible, by then, to set a fire to Marleen. Tall, bland, opaque, forbidding, Marleen had few true friends, but not a single enemy. She was a nondescript.

Had Hein had enemies—he did not know a single one who might have said so openly—he would have shrugged his ample shoulders: to him, it mattered not a whit.

While Hein and Marleen grew apart, Natasha flourished merrily. When chance arose, there was Natasha, ready. Would she have spurned a ham, if an arch-enemy—of whom she had none either—had offered it to her? Not she. She scorned no opportunities; she was alert for them. She had elected, had she not, to live right in the lap of luxury? She wintered in Marleen's warm kitchen, in comfort and in leisure, and no one said a word.

But on the other hand, while squirreling away discards at every opportunity to save up for a rainy day, she did not hurt the folks of Apanlee. To even think she might would have been alien to her nature.

In lively prattle passed her days. All babies, round and rosy!

Now that Marleen had broken down and relinquished that umbrella—Natasha would no more have stolen Hein from her than she could steal an icon from a priest. A romp in the hay hardly counted.

Surprisingly, it was Marleen and not Natasha who kept producing offspring, and every child was dimpled. They swelled Natasha's heart. She swaddled them severely so that they wouldn't scare themselves with their own tiny hands.

Each year, when measles swept throughout the district, Natasha had no sleep; she nursed the little ones. She did so till

she dropped. She felt beloved, useful, still reasonably pretty. At intervals, Hein whispered that to her.

She didn't contradict him, nor would she urge him on. "That's your opinion," she would say, and swat him with a handy diaper.

When winter came and snow fell in abundance and others struggled through the flakes to find a bit of firewood, Natasha sorted socks into neat piles, and if she found a sock that had a hole, she knew to whom it went.

She took good care of Dominik who was her rightful son, but soon, the borders blurred. She mothered all; she served them all; the twin boys were her favorites.

"You two—just remarkable birds," she would say tenderly. "Who cuddles you? Who spoils you? Who gives you smacking kisses?"

She taught them how to drink without slurping; she taught them how to pee without dribbling. She wouldn't let them step in puddles. She watched them day and night.

"Why two of you?" Natasha asked with pride, as though they were her own.

She would contrive small games to get the toddling twins to laugh. They fell onto her bosom, squealing, while pushing Dominik aside.

"Who swaddles you? Who pampers you? You think I can't tell you apart?"

Her own son, by contrast, a regular Tartar! She doubled up with laughter at Dominik's angry visage.

From the outset, he was different. He didn't profit from advice, much less from punishment.

As official Baba to the twins of Apanlee, Natasha earned the right to sleep at the foot of their cradle in case of an emergency. She brought a wicker basket along for Dominik and hung it by a strong rope from the ceiling. Hein helped to hammer in the nails.

He gave the swing a jaunty push. "Hey, Dominik! Smile, Dominik! You'd like to be part of the party?"

"Your conduct is hardly becoming," Natasha chided, while crinkling her eyes.

"Says who?" he winked at her.

His laughter made her bolder. "Go soak your beard," she cried, pretending to be angry, but her strong teeth just gleamed at him and caught themselves by accident on his long mustache tips—but that was as far as it went.

"No grudges, Natasha?" teased Hein.

"No grudges. See where my hand is? Right on my heart. I swear by my favorite saint."

"You used to bear grudges, Natasha."

"*Ach!* That was long ago."

She bore no grudges. She felt no misgivings. She was as sturdy and as common as a mule, and had no doubts at all.

She bit into a zwieback crust. She meant it when she said: "The jealous times are past."

"If she is blind," Natasha told herself, "that is her own misfortune. What's there to stop us now?"

So what if her own offspring still left puddles on the floor? That warm and cozy nursery would doubtlessly do wonders for his bladder.

She took a daring risk: she tucked her son right in between the twins who were, by then, as trained to their enameled potties as kittens to a sandbox.

Hein only winked and laughed. Marleen just clattered with her dishes, pretending she was deaf.

Natasha let out her breath.

At Apanlee, there was no end to elegance—and she was part of that. At Apanlee, men drank their tea from glasses and women used small cups—she crooked her pinkie likewise.

She petitioned several saints to watch out for Marleen, which was a small concession.

Natasha had her times—as did Marleen—when angry feelings overwhelmed, when jealousy flamed in her heart. Those days were rare, however. Hein and Marleen now took leisurely

strolls, especially on letter day, when bundles from America arrived. Natasha stayed behind, which might be galling and unfair, but then that gave her ample time to search the bottom drawers and check for useful items. The couple walked right down the beaten goose path where she and Hein, not all that long ago, had walked. What did they say to each other? Not much. What needed to be said, had been said. Long ago. The two would walk in stolid silence, always, each holding a fat toddler by the hand.

In fourteen years of wedlock, Hein and Marleen produced ten hardy children. After the twins came four boys, then a girl, then another, and then a second set of twins—named Annelie and Erika.

Natasha scrubbed their diapers to make them white as snow.

"Why two again?" Natasha argued weakly. "Can you explain that, Hein? My eyes just popped out of my head. One pair isn't enough?"

"Ask Uncle Benny. He will know. It's in the strain, no doubt."

Natasha sometimes went to seek the hunchback's counsel. She liked to sit and look at him and watch him think his thoughts. The fragile cripple knew most anything there was to know; the things he didn't know, nobody knew; sheet music even; that was old Uncle Benny. He spoke several languages—living and dead. His writing was hard to decipher. As years piled on years, his letters grew smaller, more cramped. He published editorials to general benefit.

Natasha asked in a low voice: "Why two of them again?"

He had no answer to that one.

"Why two at once?" she pressed. "Some people have it all. The bounty never stops."

"I can't say why or how."

"It isn't fair, is it?" Her heart was aching for another youngster of her own, now that her Dominik had learned to swallow yogurt without gagging and would soon run away.

"No. Life's not fair, Natasha."

"No doubt some vengeful saint of mine—" It didn't happen often, but there were times, rare times, when her resentment showed.

"The clouds pile up," said Uncle Benny. "A menace to the grain."

Natasha squinted hard to see if he spoke allegorically. She dabbed her eyes with Marleen's discard finery. Natasha was a human being; she had her moments, too. She said again, more forcefully: "It isn't fair. Life is not fair."

The words came of themselves, though she was seized with shame. The troubling thoughts were just like weeds that kept on coming back. No matter how she tried to root them out, they kept on coming back. She wasn't getting any younger. She would have liked another child. She had but Dominik—who was, to tell the truth, a spiteful boy, a scoundrel.

"I wish I had an answer."

She patted Uncle Benny's hump, fluffed up his pillows, and took herself back to her suds.

But overriding any animosity that might have rankled deep within Natasha's sturdy peasant soul lay the comforting knowledge that now she had three meals a day, a pair of brand new wooden clogs as often as she needed, and just as many seed potatoes as she, Ivan and Dominik decided to consume.

It was the soft road for Natasha.

When gossip moved indoors—why, so did she, with nonchalance. While field hands left and right bent forward in their harnesses to haul the load of life to make the rich yet richer, the poor yet poorer, she had a privileged station: she was allowed to stay inside and scrub the freckled fry.

Natasha was a realist. She knew her source of power. Were it not for her own resources—her pretty arms and rounded rump—her Dominik would have to eat what Ivan grew, and since Ivan grew next to nothing, that could have been the end of Dominik.

No, it was up to her to supplement, and supplement she did.

Easier, by far, to rely for her old age on Hein and Marleen.

Life was not just endurable but pleasant. She jauntily waved both hands at her beloved charges whenever they sat, high atop the water wagon, and rode off to the fields.

Sometimes she rode along to pass out the buckets of coffee, the baskets of zwieback, a queen. She had her ups and downs, as did Marleen, as Ivan did and Hein—all human beings.

"*Ach ja,*" she sighed, High German style. *So ist's. Was kann man machen?*

What could she do, except to dream? Her dream was as intact as ever. Her Dominik would grow into a placid bureaucrat. She dwelled on that a lot. He would show them. He would get even yet. But then again, when she bent down across another cradle that held another child of Apanlee, a glow like heated honey filled her heart.

# Chapter 39

Dominik grew up within the warmth of Apanlee. He was a misfit from the start, refusing to obey the Elders.

He took to thieving early. He soaked a puppy's tail in oil and put a match to it. He led the twins to mischief with tall tales, told purple jokes and jabbed them with his elbow so that they laughed out loud on languid Sunday afternoons. He ran around with unlaced shoes. He smacked his lips and had poor table manners. His language was the gutter language of the field hands when they returned from market after having fallen foolishly for an inferior deal.

Here was a child with knobby knees and yellow ears who would divert himself by pulling spiders from the ground with beeswax—the horror of the neighborhood. He dipped his wooden spoon into the kasha that Natasha cooked for him and brought it to his mouth:

"Hot! *Donnerwetter*! *Donnerwetter*!"

"Speaking German, eh?" his mother cried, delighted. "Hein, a lace handkerchief, perhaps? Just one. That's all. I swear."

Pertaining to the growing boy, who needed shoes, shirts, trousers and, above all else, consistent discipline, the two had many chats.

And then there was Ivan who raised the boy as well, for there was much forbearance for a child, be he as cross and petulant as Dominik, in Ivan's dulled emotions. But Dominik did not repay Ivan in kind.

"You oaf! You stink of alcohol and sweat."

Thus angered and provoked, Ivan had little choice. His fist smote like a stone. "A hooligan—with not a trace of honor! I stink? How do I stink? He says I stink, Natasha. Did you hear that? I stink?"

"You do," said Natasha, proud of her Apanlee baths.

"You like me just the same. Don't you? Confess the truth, Natasha."

"So what?" said she, and laughed.

Between them still was much goodwill, despite the angry flare-ups the grain spirit caused. On summer evenings, when she was in a mellow mood, Natasha still scooted over for him.

Hein was a man who earnestly believed in discipline, and long before young Dominik shed his first set of teeth, he found himself jailed in an unheated room for stealing.

"I'll climb through the window," Dominik sobbed. He fought back with spite and resentment.

"I'll blister your backside!" roared Hein. He loosened his belt and gave the recalcitrant youngster ten trustworthy lashes. The beating left welts that stayed, purple and swollen, for days.

The boy thief hurled, retaliating, a rock right through the bedroom window that smashed a night-side lamp. He was still small. He was incorrigible. Consensus was censorious.

Here was a malcontent, a counterfeit, a mongrel, unwilling to be civilized, defiant of authority. As with lava flowing down a slope, the evil from within kept pushing to the fore.

"Robust and iron-jawed," thought Hein, vexed often past his sufferance. To be harsh with the bastard child was not much to

his liking, but what was he to do? Young branches needed trimming.

The hunchback in his wicker chair was silent. The hunchback watched it all.

Natasha wished for a submissive son. "A bureaucrat. A first-class cobbler. Or, at the very least, a train conductor. Is that too much to ask?" she told the cripple daily, to which he answered nothing.

She made him write her three devoutest wishes on paper which she held to a flame to please a birthday saint. She loved her son; she loved the twin boys, too. Not even she could help comparing—at cost to Dominik.

She beseeched all her favorite icons, asking them to intervene. She, with a level head upon her shoulders, with eyes that saw as clearly without glasses as Uncle Benny did with spectacles, would often scold and sometimes even slap the ruffian, but Dominik just pulled his head between his shoulders and let the punishment roll by.

"Somebody ought to make him swallow castor oil and make him stand in the town square," said Marleen spitefully. When it came to Natasha's growing boy, Marleen spoke her mind, and not in whispers either.

"The apple falls close to the tree," she said to Dorothy.

"Oh, my! Oh, my!" wailed Dorothy, as gentle now as ever.

"It's true."

"Don't say that! Please! Don't ever say that. Ever!" Her eyes still sparkled at her husband. He still kissed the top of her head and the tip of each small, dainty finger.

Marleen just dropped her lower lip, a sign that she was angered past endurance. "Why not? The truth is already well known."

"No need to dwell on it."

Marleen did not like Dominik. She hated him with a cold hatred that started somewhere in the depths of wounded pride

and always ended in a heated shouting match.

"You heel! You hooligan!" shouted Marleen, a woman otherwise in full control, sucked down into some murky depths by fear and hurt and fury.

When Marleen fumed at Dominik, Natasha knew that it was unwise to collide unnecessarily, but there were times when she spoke up to take her scoundrel's side.

"Was he born fat?" Natasha pointed out.

Most of the time, when Marleen's temper flared, Natasha quietly ducked. No matter what the provocation, Natasha waited patiently for Marleen's anger to subside before she took the path to Apanlee again.

The neighborhood stood wary. The dogs became restive when Dominik entered a room. The boy was born a hooligan, was growing up a hooligan, and would most likely die a hooligan in the tsar's prisons somewhere.

One sunny Sunday in September, the ugly youngster fixed a cold, hard stare and said to Marleen softly: "Last night, I had the oddest dream."

"What dream?"

"I watched your homestead crackling in the flames."

"Come here! And turn your pockets inside out," Marleen cried, horrified. "How often did I tell you not to thieve my matches?" Her anger sent him reeling.

"He'll end up being skewered by the Cossacks like a dog," Marleen kept shouting at Natasha.

"I could bear anything but that," Natasha shouted back.

"Quick! Feed him several radishes with butter," begged Dorothy, who mended stockings to perfection.

While Uncle Benny's little love just fanned herself in agony and whispered back in undertones that she agreed—the youngster was a shame, disgrace, and constant irritant—the full-blown evidence was there: but why make bad things worse by giving them a name?

The day when Dominik tried to castrate a cat, after pushing it

headfirst into his boot, Hein took him by the hand and led him to the trusted midwife who had fished the mix-blood from the straw.

"I have misgivings," said Hein, shifting foot to foot to cover his discomfort. "Here. Take a look at him, and tell me what you see."

The midwife shone a light into the youngster's angry eyes. She took a haulm and probed his wide-spaced teeth. She rolled tobacco on her thigh and blew thick smoke around his genitals. She rapped his chest and inspected the soles of his feet. In the end, she sat back and declared: "A grumbler and complainer."

"I noticed that. Afraid of work," said Hein.

"A pair of fine, blue eyes."

Hein coughed away his tension. "I noticed that as well."

"His heart in knots. A burning thirst for power."

Hein sighed. "Is there an herb? Price has no significance."

"In olden days," the midwife said, "a public flogging would have cured his malady in no time short at all."

Hein bit his lips. A public flogging might have helped. These days, the tsars were much too lenient with their subjects. They gave them this; they gave them that. Schools. Teachers. Everything. And still the malcontents cried: "More." Still peasants shouted, border to border: "If not reform, then Revolution."

The midwife said lamely, her glance avoiding Hein's: "Find him something to do."

"How often have I offered him a job? I offered many times that I would pay him handsomely for shining my new boots."

"Take him to church."

"I did. And even on an empty stomach."

The Elders wrought their miracles by prayers, but even they had no effect on Dominik. To walk in Christ's footsteps was the law for the tsar's favored children, but if he tried, if he did that, insisted Dominik—blisters! Still more blisters!

"He has more of a temper than three Cossacks put together. There's too much energy in him. He dances till he drops."

The midwife pushed them both out through her door and shouted after them: "Sit him in a bucket, then, with ice up to the

rim. Or put him on an anthill."

Precisely as the neighborhood predicted, things went from bad to worse with Dominik, a genuine recalcitrant.

Natasha tried her best to remedy the situation. She hated idleness. She knew that the bedrock of merit was work.

"Look. By example. Step by step. And rung by rung," she told her son, who sneered.

"That's not for me," said Dominik. He dreamed up illnesses as though he were a spinster. You name it, he had it: headaches, sniffles, indigestion, stomach and gall bladder troubles. He came down with jaundice; he never ran out of complaints.

Natasha told her son, her own feet on the ground: "He cannot help it, Dominik. He loves his wife's sons more. Just enter and leave by the side door."

"A heart of stone and marble."

"Be fair. You know that is not true."

"It is, too. It is true."

"He promised he would send you to Odessa to be apprenticed to a cobbler. Is he to blame the cobbler moved away?"

"He promised, then forgot." Dominik sucked his breath in through his teeth. "A cobbler, huh? We'll see."

Natasha opened all her windows to let the evil spirits out, but still there was no cure. "How I despise his waxed and upturned mustache," muttered Dominik, while doubling up with cramps.

Natasha came in tears to Hein. "Not yet a grandfather, and already absent-minded," wept Natasha.

"There's nothing else for me to do." Hein was at his wits' end. "He's practically grown. Just you be glad he doesn't tumble girls."

"He's barely sixteen years of age."

"That's old enough. Don't you remember?"

She looked at him through misty eyes. "Ah, memories like fleeting kisses. Our youthful slips. Our bitter love. Just don't desert us now."

Hein blinked in consternation. "I did my best. You could have asked for nothing more. Have I not always done my best?"

"A cursed life," grieved Natasha.

"Whose fault is that? He didn't learn and wouldn't try. He'll end up on the thieves' market. That is the common talk."

"If only you—"

Tradition spoke through Hein, and with his forebears' tongues: "He needs to work his way up. Rung by rung. And step by step. Drive that into his head."

"Right. Rung by rung. And step by step. That's what I always say," Natasha sighed, assessing Hein through lowered lashes. "And looking just like you."

"For God's sake, tell me how I managed to offend you. What do you want this time?"

"Not much."

"Just tell me what you want. Don't be so cross with me. Well? Where's your tongue, Natasha?"

She just kept munching on a crust. She spoke so softly that he barely heard her words. "Two forenames, Hein. His own. His father's. So he can walk with pride."

Hein's face turned fiery red. The cold air lashed like swords. "A new, warm coat for you."

"A handsome horse," Natasha compromised.

"Your greed is bottomless."

"There is yet fire in your heart," she told him softly, still a beguiling woman. "There is nothing but ashes in mine."

Which was the fattest lie. She knew it; so did he. He waited out her sulking with a smile.

"In any forest, Dominik," explained the crippled pundit, while cutting paper chains to make a small child laugh, "no two trees are alike. And neither, in this unfair world, are we."

But Dominik gave Uncle Benny a hard stare and sucked his fingertips. "I will not wait for heaven," muttered Dominik. "That's not for me. That is their own misfortune."

"Don't talk like that."

"You do not take me seriously?"

"I take you very seriously," said Uncle Benny calmly.

"Well, then?"

"To take you seriously doesn't mean that I agree. It doesn't mean I think that you are right. You'd better think things through."

It was a Sunday evening, the cripple's pensive time. Peaceful lay the steppe. His little Dorothy, her tongue between her lips, tried to compose a birthday poem for an old, ailing cousin who needed cheering up. Natasha tickled a baby. Marleen darned a sock by a flickering kerosene lamp. A servant was laying the table. The twins sat outside, on the porch, surrounded by numerous cousins, just wiggling their toes in the breeze. They liked to sit like that, and watch the sun slide into the orchards, watch the moon climb through the clouds. In yet a few more years, all power would shift to their shoulders.

The wind bore evening scents. The meadows were sprinkled with daisies. Ivan snored in small gasps, propped against a tree.

"You are a wise and learned man, " said Hein to Uncle Benny, chin pointing at Ivan. "Now look at him. Just look at him. Is that a hood-winked peasant? How is he suffering a bitter lot?"

"He cannot read or write. That does not mean he cannot think."

"He doesn't have a kopeck in his pocket or a clear thought inside his head."

"Does he have land?" the hunchback said, and ran his slender fingers through his corkscrew hair.

"Don't make me laugh. What would he do with it?"

"Next time, you write my editorials."

"I might," said Hein, now warming to the challenge. "His father died a frozen beggar; his grandfather, a drunken fool. A tsar gave him his freedom. What did he do with it?"

"Hein, listen to my question. What is Ivan now if not another bonded serf, in fact, if not in name?"

"Did I not give him land? One of my finest parcels. It's full of weeds and thistles—"

"He needs equality. He is entitled to equality."

Hein snorted through his nostrils. That was a Josie thought. He'd had nose full of those Josie letters; that's all she talked about. Equality? That thought grew from the sewer. In faraway America, maybe, where any fool—just any fool!—could vote to change the government, equality might work. But here? Vast power thrust into the hands of unskilled peasants?

"Do we need swollen heads?"

"Perhaps—"

Hein just puffed up his stomach. He knew whereof he spoke. His arguments were made for him by history. Equality? It had been tried with all due speed, in all good will, and it had failed—failed miserably. The serfs had been given their freedom; the serfs had been given their land. And what had come of that? The fields were too poor, lamented the muzhiks; the payments too high; it was better to be like a child, cried the muzhiks who ran to Hein's father, complaining. "In olden times, nobody worried; why fix what isn't broken? Peet Neufeld did our worrying for us."

Old Uncle Benny cleared his throat. His eyes moved slowly to Natasha. "They make convenient servants, do they not?"

"She's past her prime. She will not die of want. She'll always have a place beside my embers."

"She has a son, who has a demon's eyes."

"If you are born a king," said Hein, "you live and die a king. A pauper lives and dies a pauper. Hey, Dominik. Come here. Tell us your latest slogan."

"All people, equal brothers," said Dominik, and scrambled to his feet. "And after that, the land a blaze of glory."

"He's just a loudmouth, Hein," Natasha pleaded instantly. "Pay him no mind. I'll talk to him tonight."

Natasha did not know if she should laugh or cry. She mediated constantly. She, too, looked forward to the Revolution some folks had promised her—but in the meantime, what? To see a child at peace melt in her lap—that was Natasha's happiness. To see her apron flutter on Marleen's clothesline, next to Marleen's—that was equality.

"Oh, Dominik," she sighed. "What's gotten into you?"

"If not by goodwill, then—by force."

She smiled at his pretentions and changed another diaper. A cousin read aloud some verses from the Bible. The dogs lay sprawling by the fire. Equality, a fine and heady thing, in principle—Natasha welcomed strangers kissing strangers and clicking glasses for the sake of Freedom, Liberty and Brotherhood. All that was jaunty stuff. At the drop of a hat, celebrations. And every second day a holiday. Free rides on whistling trains, up and down the Russian countryside. She, too, agreed: More land for the muzhik, and justice for all. Such hopes were comforting when winter nights were long and bedbugs moved through cracks.

"Pay no attention, Hein," she said again. She shushed her son expertly, and winked at Uncle Benny.

The hunchback's eyes missed that; they sought his treasure, Dorothy. Her waistline had not changed.

"What do you say, my love? Give me your sentiment."

"The tsars," said Dorothy, as proud as she was shy, "received their empire from the Lord. Only the Lord can take it from them."

"The tsars and the church," said Marleen, looking up from her darning as well, "are the two greatest powers on earth."

"To think like that," said Dominik, while turning on his heel, "is just like walking barefoot in the snow." He spat in a wide arc. He had lost several front teeth, but that did not hamper his smile.

Marleen grew haughtier than ever with every new pregnacy, as pale as the moon on a wintry night. Though she was getting on in years, there was no end to dimples and to diapers, to prayers and to visitors. Fine, even wrinkles framed her eyes, but the future grew under her apron.

The fogs arrived and didn't go away. A vague discomfort lingered. It had no form, no name.

It was as though a twig of poison ivy stroked Hein's shoulder blades each time he glanced at Dominik. Outside the gates of Apanlee, dissent crept out of crevices.

The rabbis pressed on as though they knew nothing what-

ever.

The Cossacks kept combing the haystacks for them, and when they found them, they abused them.

The peasants shook their fists and cursed.

Bread riots broke out in Berdjansk.

There was no end to innuendo and intrigue, belittling a monarch admired by all. And at the root? Equality. That was the base agenda.

A curse, the very word.

A few insurgents were exposed as being operatives in plots to do away with monarchy and sent in irons to the north. And still, no end to taunts. And still, no end to rifts. The shaggy radicals were not the friendly sort. Their doors were always locked. Their pockets overflowed with pamphlets. Their whispers brought bad luck.

They had no country, but they were everywhere.

In Rome. In Paris. In Berlin.

No matter where they settled, they fanned the flames of greed. All betting systematically on banking and on trade.

Yes, even then. That was the sentiment. From fence to fence, the sentiment was this: Just watch them strike themselves a bargain, an abacus in hand, before you blinked an eye or took another breath—such was the way of Israel. If you were well-informed, you didn't ask. You knew. Not one of them honored the Cross. Glib talkers, all of them, who talked of taking over Palestine. Once they had Palestine, enslavement of the world was next.

All that was in the Bible.

The Cossacks rushed them, robbed them, cursed them, sometimes even skewered them on their long spears—they fasted, and for no discernible reason, and took their meals at random. It was believed by not a few that this was done for wicked cause: to throw the tsar's hounds off their scent.

It was now widely understood and, furthermore, sporadically repeated by knowing people of all sorts that this antagonistic tribe

was feasting on the blood of mankind universally.

From the cradle to the grave, and in between as well, each one of them a libertine!

The dogs would growl in apprehension. Suspicions permeated everything, but proof of treachery was harder to come by. You had best cut an arc.

Hein would discuss the Jewish problem now and then with Uncle Benny, who kept an open mind.

"Some Hebrews have no eyebrows," Hein said to Uncle Benny. "Why did they shave them off?"

To which Uncle Benny said nothing.

Hein glared at Uncle Benny. "When their answers turn suddenly vague, you know mischief is afoot."

"Go on."

"They keep reaching into your pocket and make you believe they have sold you a song."

"I said go on."

"So tell me. Why are all of them on cordial terms with foreigners?" Hein asked aggressively.

Hein couldn't help himself; that just slipped out; he hand't meant to wound his little relative, who kept his own pet foreigners—specifically a female fool, a so-called liberated woman, whose name was Josephine, who had become American in outlook and in words. She and the cripple kept up a lively correspondence. She kept on sending clever clippings espousing odd ideas—ideas as disastrous as a flying ink pot. The one recurring word? Equality. That's all she talked about.

"I lack the courage," said the cripple, "to find a sharp reply."

Hein hated namby-pamby. Sometimes his mild and gentle cousin, intent on being fair to every side, made Hein as thirsty for a red-hot argument as salty soup made him crave icy water to calm a sudden thirst.

"The New World Order? Nothing new!" the farm folks sneered, when Erika came visiting from California to search out

the kernels of truth.

"Go on."

"All that is in the Bible. We heard about it, even then. All this was there, for many years. It hovered at the edges. No sun was strong enough to make it disappear. It didn't have a name."

It's true: it grew in intuition, instinct and accumulating evidence. But on the other hand, none gave it extra weight. It was not of their world. To claim that it was more than a perplexing feeling of discord would give undue intensity to history. It wasn't central to existence. It was just there—a clammy presence. Nobody argued it away.

The Lord and the tsars had been bred into Apanlee's genes.

Hard work, self-discipline, pride, honor, cleanliness, debt to the rich, black soil had anchored all their rights. To challenge the established order by bringing in the concept of equality was as unheard-of in those young years of our century as suckling a small, squealing infant in a church.

"Don't make me laugh," said Hein, and laughed until his shoulders shook. He reddened, but he laughed. "Democracy? The very thought!"

It might have been a notion theoretically intriguing to the progressive mind—to pundits such as Uncle Benny. It might have spurred the priests to fervent prayers for the small Tsarevich who kept on seeping his pale blood into his joints. It might inflame a malcontent like Dominik. But it was of no significance at all to Hein, Ivan, Marleen, Natasha, Dorothy. The earth spun on its axis. You guarded against heresy. You found an extra babushka to wrap around your shoulder blades. You lit another fire.

That's how it was. For years.

At Apanlee, all was still sun-drenched days and clear and windless nights. The steppe was blazing. The Lord and the harvest were one. The churches were packed, with standing room only. Natasha scrubbed another diaper and burped another baby. The Elders lifted comfort from their prayer books and warned against the vanity of thought.

The leaves were turning red. Soon, it would be October.

And little Uncle Benny—as ever excellent at analyzing pros and cons, as ever studying the drift of history to the last dab of ink!—was probably the only one at Apanlee who read the headlines, front to back, who understood precisely why Apanlee was rushing headlong towards Golgotha.

# Lebensraum! - Book II - Chapters 40 - 77

Reviewed by Michael S. McMillen

The second book of Lebensraum! opens with the German pacifists in Apanlee sowing and reaping as rumors of impending war and revolution sweep across Russia.

Hein Neufeld, one of Peet Neufeld's grandsons, continues to dismiss the threats of upheaval with naive confidence. His own family is already paying for an early mistake, his fathering of an illegitimate son, Dominik. Dominik's mother is a Russian woman, a youthful infatuation named Natasha, whom Hein and his wife Marleen take into their home as a domestic.

In Mennotown, Hein's cousin, Jan Neufeld, continues to prosper, even as his wife Josephine throws thrift to the winds and spends recklessly among the moneylenders and "progressives" of Wichita. Faith is still supreme in Apanlee and Mennotown, but it begins to grow flabby and to fraternize with presumption.

Meanwhile unanchored intellectualism masquerades as discernment while seducing its victims in the Ukraine and in Kansas. The physically handicapped but bookish Uncle Benny, an illegitimate cousin to Hein, compensates for his physical deformity by addicting himself to reading. He also writes articles advocating radical reform.

Like many who choose to soar in the rarefied realm of abstract speculation detached from reality, Uncle Benny will help to unleash the forces of his own destruction. His counterpart and correspondent in America is Jan's wife Josephine, a woman also obsessed with book knowledge and scornful of the robust, rustic virtues of her husband and mother-in-law. With itching ears she lusts after every wind of doctrine, intoning the slogans of "equality," dressing in provocative new fashions, shocking her Christian neighbours by her intimacy with the money-lending Jews of Wichita and agitating on behalf of the suffragettes.

Josephine, however, is in America, and thus has the priceless opportunity to redeem herself, or at least find her senses, before it's too late.

The theme that it is already far too late runs throughout Lebensraum! - Book II like a telltale draft in Winter. If civilisation and decency are not to wilt and fade from the earth, those who uphold them must overcome manifest temptations and redeem the times.

Book II is a tragedy of errors. Some of the characters put up a valiant fight in the midst of horrendous conditions. Some, whose primary enemy lies within rather than without, succumb and yield the field to their ravenous antagonists.

We are reminded throughout this book that as men sow, they will also reap. The earthly wages of sin, however, are seldom apportioned in any logical or just form. That's because evil itself is neither logical nor just. It does, however, exact a toll. Its effects can sometimes be modified by subsequent reform and repentance, but as everyone in Apanlee and Mennotown knows, not even God can alter last year's harvest.

Much of Lebensraum! - Book II is a horror story. First, the Russian nation is knocked out of the war. Hein's illegitimate son Dominik, who has grown into a bitter, malevolent and amoral man, temporarily finds a purpose in the military defense of Russia. He ends up in prison and is eventually released upon the coming of the Red revolution. He joins with a group of desperados now feeding upon their country.

Resentful of his illegitimacy and the lack of love bestowed upon him in his childhood, Dominik leads his Red comrades to Apanlee and betrays its inhabitants. The new revolutionaries embark on a blood-soaked spree of unspeakable cruelty and terror. Among the dead is Hein himself, the grower of food murdered by hands that know only force and fury. Uncle Benny, whose own scarlet prose helped fan the fires of this onslaught, and his wife Dorothy are killed savagely.

Some do miraculously survive. Among those who live through the first wave of terror are Hein's wife Marleen, her twin

sons Yuri and Sasha and her daughter Mimi. A cousin named Jonathan, grandson of the ill-fated Uncle Benny, manages to escape and takes up a life as an itinerant beggar. He will find his way to Germany and return to impose some justice on the hordes that have ransacked and bled his native Apanlee.

Much of the second book recounts the increasingly tight noose of terror that the communists wrap around Apanlee. Wanton shootings and deportations to Siberia begin to clear the land of the productive.

The Reds seek to grow bread by force and issue paper quotas to people forbidden to enjoy even the meager fruits that the blasted land will still yield. The commissars take a devilish delight in exercising arbitrary authority and in arresting people who have done nothing.

Apanlee is decimated, but Marleen, the twins and Mimi are able to hang on, partly because the flinty Natasha acts as a go-between with her son Dominik, now elevated to leadership of the collective.

Having betrayed his hometown to brutal beasts, Dominik becomes responsible for fulfilling the quotas for his Soviet masters. His "inheritance" of Apanlee is as illegitimate as he is. Terror, coercion and crude animal cleverness are his only tools.

The thugs and hooligans who rise to fill the ranks of the new party apparatus revel in their chance to dominate their betters and destroy them. People are taught slogans, as if demoralised, terrorized innocents are likely to be inspired by them. The slogans, however, like everything else about the Soviets, are intended to cow and strike fear. In what must be deliberate and cynical irony, schoolchildren are taught to refer to the time of the tsars as that "before the revolution made us free."

In Mennotown the old Faith holds out longer against the new Freedom, but Josephine chafes and pouts under restrictions on her intellectual and social whims. Throughout their marriage, Jan has yielded to her and indulged her every wish. He wants a son, however. Their first son died in a freak winter accident and Josie gives birth to a succession of daughters.

Having reached the frontier of middle age, Josephine does not wish to venture another pregnancy. Jan, however, beginning to sense that his marriage is running out of control, has other ideas. Although Josephine will come to idolize her last-born, a son she nicknames Rarey, she will never forgive Jan for the importunate passion that leads to the lad's conception.

Josephine may be a thorn and a trial to Jan, but she is a comely one. She even makes efforts at halting her own slide into modernist depravity. Eventually, she admits that she fought the law of nature – and the law won.

In the meantime, a series of disasters dooms the once proud Jan Neufeld. His wife's expenditures pile on top of his own questionable credit purchases. Previous Neufelds would never have surrendered themselves to the lenders. The Donoghues have not retreated from their aims. The nascent labour movement draws them to itself and they begin to make escalating demands on their employer, Jan Neufeld.

One of Jan's mills is burnt, and suspicion hovers around the Donoghues. It turns out that Jan is not quite in step with modern times. He never bothered to take out the insurance policy on the mill.

Jan's consequent illness symbolizes the malaise and torpor of Western civilisation reeling on both sides of the Atlantic. The old verve is gone. He does seek temporary solace in the theology of the elder Dewey Epp, but to no avail. As Jan deteriorates, Josephine hitches her star to one more pipe dream, that of moving to California!

Eventually, Jan is reduced to seeking a loan – now federally subsidized and regulated. In a scene resonating with Randian overtones, Jan draws upon his last ounce of self-respect to negotiate a loan from the Donoghue now arrogantly ensconced at the bank.

The dialogue between a man who is still trying to do business in an honest, straightforward fashion and a moral degenerate who knows only how to function as a conduit of second-hand power is an eloquent summation of the rot that has eaten its way

into the entrails of a once proud and independent country.

The scene with the Donoghue "bankster" is prelude to Jan's final fall. Throughout the years, he had turned his back on the firewater offered by his tippling friend Doctorjay. At this point, however, Jan has been broken by his pressing crown of woes. He gets drunk with Doctorjay and takes refuge in the hospitality of Dewey Epp's soup kitchen.

When Jan learns that even the alms he is reduced to accepting there are underwritten by Roosevelt and his raiders, the dam bursts. He shoots Dewey dead and ends up killing himself.

Lebensraum! - Book II is an unflinchingly honest portrayal of the early year's of this now hoary century. The aspirations that animated Peet Neufeld and his sons have been snuffed out in the hissing spittle of the architects of the New World Order. The price of joy is not even quoted amid this procession of market collapse, legalized looting, war, revolution and reigns of terror.

If the twentieth century's reflection makes us recoil in disgust, the fault lies not in those who have the historic facts, artistic vision, and courage to hold the glass up steadily. The thick miasma of despair that permeates Lebensrau!- Book II is scarcely dispelled by Doctorjay's drunken defiance of the "banksters" with which the book closes.

But it does show someone still has a spine.

Faith. Hope. Charity. Not even the ravages of Soviet Russia and social-welfare America can annihilate these. Faith hangs on tenaciously in the face of ridicule and persecution. Charity is widely counterfeited, nowhere more piously than in America, where the Old Time Religion gets cozier by the day with Rooseveltian radicalism and sets up tax-subsidized soup kitchens with one hand and dispenses tracts with the other. Genuine charity manages to limp along in its own venerable, unspectacular way. The unflagging hospitality of Lizzie, the bonhomie of Doctorjay–even the mule-like loyalty of Natasha to Marleen and her kin stand out as coin of this realm.

And what of hope? What hope can survive the ruthless

Russian bear allied with the crowns and republics of Europe and the languorous strength of America?

Ask a hungry urchin taken in by a stern and loving Hausfrau. Ask Marleen Neufeld, an emaciated prisoner in her own homeland. Ask the emaciated heirs and the ghosts of those who sowed and reaped, who built and nurtured Apanlee.

Their answers will be heard.

## Lebensraum! - Book III - Chapters 78 - 125

Reviewed by Michael S. McMillen

Of all America's foes in all of her wars, no enemy has been more vilified for so long as the Third Reich. Every now and again, someone wonders why.

If novelty enhances a novel's appeal, Lebensraum! - Book III should be a bestseller. The sections dealing with the Second World War will strike many readers as the literary equivalent of a photographic negative. For a change, the Nazis are wearing the white hats.

While writing this review, I came across a relevant quotation from *Founding Father* by Richard Whalen: "World War II was the liberals' war and they are understandably determined to uphold their version of its origins with all the formidable political and intellectual resources at their command."

Since the early 1940s, Adolf Hitler has been the West's Villain for All Seasons. Books, plays, movies, "docudramas," and television series feature Nazis and Germans interchangeably in the stock roles of archetype of evil and scourge of mankind. The only time National Socialists aren't portrayed as goose-stepping demons is when they are cast as hyperpunctilious, heiling buffoons.

In Lebensraum! - Book III the reader will find no such caricatures of the German Volk. He will find instead an army and

a people fighting fiercely to preserve their own race, a nation stung to the core by an all-destroying, internationalist foe.

It would be petty to object that Lebensraum! Book III fails to present an objective moral study of Hitler and his Reich. As a novel, the focus of Lebensraum! is not statistical analysis of the motives and actions of its characters. Lebensraum! is not a comprehensive history of World War II. The story is, however, rooted in fact.

History attests that there were people during the Second World War who welcomed the Nazis as saviors and heroes. The German pioneers of Lebensraum! who had once grown prosperous under the Romanovs are their representatives.

When one considers the nature of Stalin's gulag state, its goal of yoking all its subject under collectives directed by a central committee in Moscow, one can understand that the people crushed under its iron boot might have looked upon the armies of the Führer with grateful anticipation.

Lebensraum! - Book III gives us an exciting and heartbreaking glimpse of one people's moment of vindication against a comprehensively brutal engine of oppression. After the hellish terror unleashed by the Soviet revolution, Justice cries out for vengeance from the skies – or from the earth.

Young Jonathan, who escaped from the Soviets and found his way to Germany, grows into a loyal soldier of the Fatherland, and is among the Landsers who reclaim – albeit temporarily – Apanlee for its rightful owners.

Eventually, owing to overextension and strategic errors on the part of the Fuehrer (e.g., his refusal to permit retreat) the Wehrmacht is driven back by the Red Army, now counted among the Allies. One of the tragedies stalking the stoic German survivors is that those who could have helped defend them, side instead with the beast seeking to devour them.

The remnants of the Neufeld and Epp clans in the Ukraine are unable to understand the world's indifference to their suffering. They cannot imagine that the rest of the world is infected with the same notions of international collectivism as the Soviet

state.

They are utterly baffled and mystified when America, the land of Liberty, which received their own kin not so many decades earlier, joins forces with Stalin and his Reds.

When people are faced with such an inexplicable fact, they seek desperately to satisfy themselves with some kind of an answer. Lebensraum! records accurately the answer that many fixed upon: international Jewry.

The objective reader will bear in mind that the anti-Judaism expressed by some characters in these novels is not an invention of the author. The reader would do well to note that most of the main characters bear no animosity towards the Jews or anyone else. They simply wish to be left alone. Moreover, at one point, young Jonathan starts to tell what sounds like an off-colour story about Jews and is quickly chastised by Heidi, the woman who had rescued him from the streets. She explains that some of the good people with whom she had traded are Jews. The point, I believe, is that although bigoted anti-semitism unfortunately existed in Germany and elsewhere, it has nothing to do with the desire of the Germans for freedom and living space.

For centuries, the Jews had been viewed with suspicion throughout Christian Europe. This is not fundamentally because they happened to be adept at trade and finance; these functions are vital to an economy and constitute nothing inherently dishonourable or exploitative. Marked by their refusal to embrace the cross and creed of Christ, the Jews were frozen out of the circle of production by the economically fastidious (and sometimes woefully ignorant) Christians, and they became the exchangers, lenders and middlemen. Not surprisingly, many succumbed to the temptations inherent in such preoccupations and came to regard the people whose money they managed as convenient nuisances– profitable in the collective but of little consequence individually.

Marxism views the mass of men essentially the same way – and excoriates Christianity to boot. Socialist mythology sees its chosen people – the proletariat or working class – scattered

and dispersed across the world and mistreated by bourgeois, primarily Christian, society.

Many Jews became the willing spokesmen and penmen for this new global ideology. Many were archly sympathetic to its call for a strictly secular state that would tear down the crosses and churches in deference to dreams of futuristic fraternity and equality.

Marx promised a far-off Utopia to all men in exchange for a radical break with the individualistic, nationalist Christian past. The proverbial wandering Jew became in many instances an ambitious booster for both the international banker and international bolshevik. The apparent contradiction in this union of banksters and rowdies continues to mislead the unwary to this day.

Ingrid Rimland has described the concomitant growth of these two forces vividly and dramatically in Lebensraum!, particularly in Book III. Her picture of an America slouching through the Roosevelt years convinced of the gospel verity of the New York Times is not a flattering one.

Nevertheless I, as a patriotic American who believes in the founding principles of this nation, applaud the author for penning so blunt a satire of her adopted land.

America has often been described as a country with a great and eager heart. Sometimes her eagerness does her no good: the willingness to believe the glowing and deceptive dispatches from the Soviet Union; the reflexive anti-Germanism imbibed freely from the media outlets of the era; the gullible surrender to state welfarism, so long as it is buttered liberally with prattle of "compassion" and "tolerance."; the sheep-like acquiescence in the quasi-religion of received propaganda concerning the nature and extent of German mistreatment of the Jews during the war.

All this – what one might dub a pathological obsession with acting out good intentions – is symbolozed by Rarey Neufeld, who goes enthusiastically off to war to kill his German brethren for Uncle Sam (and Uncle Joe). Book III ends with a touching letter to his wife from this genuinely good man, who is killed in the waning hours of the war by anti-aircraft fire from his own

German cousin, Erika.

World War II was a disaster for everyone involved. Nevertheless, the corruption and self-hatred it fomented in the USA and Germany contributed to the unthinkable rise of the clumsy but vicious and deadly Soviet Empire.

Some claim to see in the political fall of the unwieldy beast the death of Communism. Such people are sadly mistaken. Communism today reigns and runs rampant on American college campuses and in the nooks and crannies of government both here and in Western Europe.

Today "internationalism" has become "globalism" and the UN has replaced the Red Army as the socialists' army of choice. I say here in sorrow and in anger that this very trilogy that I am reviewing will probably be banned in some of the "democracies" that helped defeat Hitler and prop up Stalin.

What God's plan for this weary world may be, I do not profess to speculate upon. I do assert, however, that the political ideas and ideals that the world needs have already been formulated - and were once put into practice for nearly a century - right here in America.

It's here in America that Ingrid Rimland's trilogy is being published. If America does not speak out on behalf of the rights of man and for the unhindered pursuit of truth, who will?

Ingrid Rimland has spoken out again - eloquently and clearly. Those who do not share her vision of America are free to disagree and to criticize.

Those who care to join her in this literary quest for Lebensraum! will find a good story well told. What more can you ask of a novelist?

# Ingrid Rimland

# Lebensraum!

## The Theft of Land and Peace

Book 2

Ingrid Rimland was a child during World War II, born to Mennonite wheat farmers in the Ukraine who had been persecuted in the Soviet Union for their pacifist beliefs. The end of World War II saw her and her family undertake a 1000 mile trek back to the homeland of their forefathers, Germany, now a war-devastated wasteland.

From there, still a youngster, she moved with her family and friends to the rain forests of Paraguay to pioneer the jungle and live, as her grandmother put it, " . . . far from the wicked world."

Since the early days of her youth, Ingrid Rimland has come vast intellectual distances. She first made a name for herself with her award-winning novel, The Wanderers, (Concordia Publishing House, 1977, Bantam Books, 1978) that depicted the German soldiers not as conquerors but as liberators and heroes in the eyes of an ethnically savagely besieged community, about to be annihilated in one of Stalin's "ethnic cleansing" operations.

In 1984, Arena Press published Furies, a powerful autobiography describing her search for freedom from intellectual oppression. She also started writing columns, articles and book reviews for dozens of papers and magazines in America and won a number of journalistic prizes and honors.

In the age of the revolutionary Internet, Ingrid Rimland dramatically wrote herself into the annals of the Freedom of Speech struggle when she defended the world-famous Revisionist Zundelsite, a website she created and administered, against a furious onslaught of powerful private and government censorship forces arraigned against her website to prevent the world from discovering a part of World War II history hitherto never exposed to an unsuspecting, misled public.

In the first two months of 1996, 1300 websites went dark in Germany in a futile attempt by German authorities to prevent German students from accessing the American-based Zundelsite - an Internet "First".

In response to that challenge, "Zundelsite mirrors" shot up spontaneously at major universities all over the globe, as young "cyber fighters" helped to defy the censors - another "First".

In August of the same year, eight historical documents on the Zundelsite were indexed - that is, forbidden - by the German government, on grounds that their historical contents were "disorienting to minors".

In the busiest week of Christmas 1996, nearly 30 million anonymous e-mail letters were slammed into the Zundelsite server system from unknown origins in Canada in an attempt to terrorize the server owner into denying the Zundelsite a place in cyberspace. Canadian and American police have never found the Internet terrorists.

Even as this book goes to print, powerful special interests manipulating the government of Canada are attempting to shut down the Zundelsite through its misnamed "Human Rights Commission" by a desperate and bizarre act - mislabeling the Internet to be a "telephone"!

Lebensraum! - a three part historical novel - is Ingrid Rimland's latest contribution to the intellectual discipline called "Revisionism" - an intellectual movement that insists that history does not belong to the manipulators behind the fratricidal wars of our century but should be freely accessible to all freedom-loving people.

**URL: http://www.zundelsite.com**
**URL: http://www.webcom.com/ina**
**E-Mail: irimland@cts.com**
**Cover photograph: Barry Evans**
**Cover design: Ernst Zündel**

ISBN 1-896006-02-7

52500>

9 781896 006024

*I dedicate this saga*
*to the maligned heroes*
*and the forgotten victims of*
*several fratricidal wars in our century -*
*men and women, brave beyond belief,*
*who hurled themselves against the forces*
*of the New World Order*

Copyright © 1998 Ingrid A. Rimland

First publication in March of 1998

Samisdat Publishers, Inc.
206 Carlton Street, Toronto,
Ontario, Canada
M5A 2L1

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission from the author, except for the quotation of brief passages in reviews.

Cover illustration by Ernst Zündel

Text set in AGaramond Semibold 12

Written and published in the United States. Printed and bound by KNI Incorporated, Anaheim, California, USA

ISBN 1-896006-02-7

This is Book II of a trilogy. Book I and III are available by writing to:

6965 El Camino Real, # 105-588
La Costa, CA 92009

Fax: 760-929-2268

# Lebensraum!

## The Theft of Land and Peace

A Novel
by
Ingrid Rimland

Book II

*Lebensraum! spans seven generations and 200 years. It is a story told to me a thousand times in many different voices: that there was once a place called "Apanlee" that fell to the Red Terror.*

*A novel is, by definition, fiction against the backdrop of genuine emotions. This novel has been my attempt to grasp and to extract the interplay between opposing ideologies, to find the core of human tragedies that make up cold statistics.*

*The novel's voice belongs to "Erika" who, in this saga, is older than I was when I experienced World War II. She is, however, of the transition generation, as I am. Hers is the ethnic voice in this novel, trying to find the right words to own up to the pride and courage that were the hallmarks of her people.*

*She learns to say: "Our history belongs to us. It won't be written, from now on, by anybody else but us."*

*This family saga was gleaned from the driftwood of history. The people I have tried to show to be of flesh and blood came of a tightly knit community of Russian-German ancestry.*

*Ingrid Rimland*

# Lebensraum! - Book I - Chapters 1-39

Reviewed by Michael S. McMillen

Push-button critics and sound-bite sages tell us that the age of the epic is past. They are wrong. Ingrid Rimland has written an inter-generational, moral panorama—an epic in prose depicting what people can be when they embrace both freedom and responsibility.

Like the poets of ancient Greece, she does not evade evil. This author knows the human condition. She illustrates what it takes for man to earn his bread—and what happens when a dash of leaven is added to the whole, wanton cruelty.

Lebensraum! is her trilogy, which traces the lives and deaths, the loves and hates, the hopes realized and the dreams dashed of people from two Russian-German families, the Neufelds and the Epps.

The first book follows them from their successes in the Ukraine during the early 19th century and closes on the brink of the war that tore Western civilisation asunder and the revolution that was Russia's undoing. It commences with a history lesson recounting the migration of peace-loving German pioneers. Early on, one of the epic's tensions comes screaming into the fore. This group of pacifists bases its creed on the Bible—*sola scriptura*—with no need of intermediaries. They refuse spiritual tribute to Papa, and they refuse military service to Caesar.

Hounded, taxed, persecuted, martyred, the sect clings to life with a robust ardor born of pure Scriptural faith. Their tenacious confidence in their ultimate deliverance helps them forge a stoic endurance and determination in the face of furious persecution.

The hounded pilgrims look to the East for living space, the land, liberty and peace needed to survive and prosper. Eventually they find a patron in the Empress Catherine the Great of Russia, who needs people to cultivate the lands along the Black and Caspian seas. She offers the German pacifists free land, self-

rule, protection and exemption from conscription.

From the start, the novel focuses on two complementary approaches to the business of living. "Some dug in deep, as Peter Neufeld did, a man with expert hands and fierce ambition." These are the men of active, curious, inventive minds, men of accurate reckoning and rolled-up sleeves who survey the problem, spit on their palms and get to work.

"Others," we are told, ". . . stayed in their covered wagons from where they prayed to Heaven day and night." Among these people is one of the Elders, a man named Hans Epp.

There is a division of labour among these hearty pioneers. Some dig and reap; others meditate and pray.

Eventually the grave and ambitious Germans establish their settlement and sink firm roots in their adopted land. The story moves steadily through that century of progress when even the land of the Tsars felt something of the heady aroma of freedom.

The peace was not to last for long—on the Eastern front or the Western. The protagonists fall prey to the twin snares of those who cling dogmatically to peace: beclouding, complacent pride in the lasting conditions of contentment and vulnerability to aggressors.

Thus, in the very nature of the people who are to enact this vast drama, we see the seeds of later suffering. Why do the innocent often end up crushed in the bloody mud? The search for Lebensraum! is partially the quest for an answer to this moral conundrum.

One of the themes at the heart of Lebensraum! is that virtue is a necessary condition of life, prosperity and happiness. The pilgrims grow and prosper in a community they name Apanlee, which will become the spiritual magnet, the inspirational font, the symbol of life and "Lebensraum" for the good offspring of the Neufelds and Epps.

Yet early on, a smoking fissure is apparent. As the productive and ambitious—represented by Peet Neufeld, Peter's son—hew a cornucopia out of the rich soil of Apanlee, the pious—represented by Hans Epp's son Willy—begin to chastise and warn

that the judgment of God must soon descend and crush the pride of the successful farmers and artisans.

These warnings go largely unheeded. After all, doesn't God bless thrift and industry? He's on His throne and the Romanovs—now the Apanlee Germans' staunch patrons—are on theirs.

In a heartrending scene, Peet Neufeld and his wife Greta are entertaining a Romanov prince who says, beaming with gratitude, "Peet Neufeld, see that sun? As long as it hangs in the sky, we of the house of Romanov vouch for protection. Always." Sadly, within decades, the devil himself will smash that pledge to dust, dethrone and massacre the Romanovs and unleash terror and death upon Apanlee and all of Russia.

Living space is the call that the industrious heed and follow. Another of the epic's contrasts opens up when some of the Apanlee Germans decide to seek their Lebensraum on the abundant prairies of America.

The cavalcade continues as new babies are born to replenish the souls of those who have died. America appeals to Peet Neufeld's son Nicky because it offers virgin opportunity to people who are willing to stand on their own and earn their keep. Nevertheless, the American apple is not immune to the vicissitudes of life or the rot and corruption engendered by second-handers, parasites and outright thieves.

Nicky and his wife, Willy's daughter Lizzy, set sail for America. Nicky is drowned. Upon arriving in America, the widow Lizzy is swindled by a man named Donoghue for a quick buck and left with a piece of seemingly worthless prairie wilderness for her troubles.

Under Lizzie's maternal guidance, however, her strong and noble son Jan leads his community in building a breadbasket of the Kansas wastes that have fallen to their lot. Contempt turns to envy in the mouths of the swindler and his family, who then seek to wrest the land back in order to sate themselves on the achievements of Jan Neufeld.

The Donoghue's goal through the years will be to "prove" that the sale was only a lease.

As the Germans prosper in their new community of Mennotown, Kansas, a word begins to sound faintly like the scratching of a hungry rat among trash and shards: Equality. This word will reverberate and knell throughout Lebensraum!

Eventually it will ignite the flames of revolution, explicitly savage in Russia, bureaucratized and sanitized in America. Indeed, it is one of the negative themes of the story, a counterpoint to the thrift, decency and faith that set the builders of Apanlee and of Mennotown apart from and above their fellows.

In scene after scene and encounter after encounter, our author shows us how those who take responsibility for themselves and face their work tenaciously have no need in the world for "Equality" in the sense that is bruited so noisily, that of income redistribution and uniformity of condition.

If equality has any meaning in a political context, it can only be in the sense that each person is an individual with his own rights and must be governed by the same laws and principles and treated by the same standards as all other people.

The heroes and heroines of Lebensraum! learn to their dismay that the baying wolves about them pervert this principle. Equality functions as a demonic wrench to tighten here, loosen there as the whims of the worthless dictate. It twists and strangles the God-fearing and productive in Russia, as ignorant curs who have half-digested intellectual slogans, try to make milch-cows of their betters.

In America, the cry of equality is heard in the baying of the Finkelsteins, who find it a useful political tool and the Donoghues, who find it a standing meal-ticket. Equality corrodes family structure and banishes harmony from the relations between the sexes. The siren song of the suffragettes is heard in the pages of Lebensraum! as a feisty character named Josie—who eventually marries and torments the dutiful Jan Neufeld—despises the vocations of wife and mother and busies herself among the moneylenders and political malcontents.

Finally, those who establish a state religion on the basis of certain peoples' suffering, while ignoring or denigrating the suf-

fering of others, invoke "equality" while seeking to stifle or outlaw even the discussion of truth.

This brings us back to the Revisionist side of Lebensraum! Rimland, who has done so much for World War II Revisionism, takes her mission a step further with Lebensraum!

A movement certainly needs a professional, systematic development in expository prose. Among the many who are providing this are David Irving, Michael Hoffmann II and Ingrid Rimland herself. Nevertheless, if a movement is to gain popular recognition and become part of the warp and woof a civilisation, it must be given flesh and blood, perceptual form. It must be embodied in art. Just as Ayn Rand illustrated her philosophy of Objectivism in characters such as Howard Roark, Dagney Taggart and John Galt, so Ingrid Rimland has given Revisionism a face in the personas of Erika, Jan Neufeld, Jonathan and others.

Lebensraum! is, of course, much more than I have been able to hint here. In its pages are limned the good, bad and ugly feelings of a special band of separatists.

The heroes and heroines of Lebensraum! are in the world, but at odds with it. They are always searching. The allure of productive freedom calls some of them to America; religious forebodings and a misguided spiritual zeal call one group of pilgrims led by Class Epp, Willy's son, on a disastrous trek eastward from Apanlee. The old virtues and customs sustain the good folk, even as newfangled ideas and bold experimental values whistle to them and whisper in their ears.

I was personally struck by the vibrant and cohesive family life that is portrayed in Book I. Rimland's depiction of family rings true to man's nature and potential. Hers is no sugar-coated puff job on the joys and sorrows of kinship. The exigencies of daily life and the social corrosion of a hostile society both take their toll on men and women of the best intentions.

The old ways, however, are always the foundation on which the good folk stand. Indeed, one senses that the robust love nurtured in the bosom of family is itself a vital part of Lebensraum, living space.

Book I ends on an ominous note, as the First World War and the Soviet revolution hover. The reader must realize that the people of Lebensraum! exhibit the full range of human emotions—from the tender to the desperate to the prejudicial.

Lebensraum! does not omit or evade the suspicions and fears—justified or otherwise—of a misunderstood and often persecuted minority. This minority, however, that grows the world's wheat and mends the world's garments has found few spokesmen or defenders.

In the opening book of Lebensraum! Ingrid Rimland establishes the groundwork for that defense."

# Chapter 40

The pacifists of Apanlee kept harvesting the wheat, while the rabbis berated the palace. All throughout spring and into early summer, while Hein was busy with the grain, a lot of cryptic messages flew back and forth between the heads opf state of countries to the west of the Ukraine while soldiers ringed the cities.

When the war broke out, it came as a surprise to all but Uncle Benny. It couldn't be. It couldn't happen—the kaiser and the tsar were cousins!

"This nonsense won't last longer than three weeks. You don't make war on family," said Hein, who spoke for all. Up came yet another sunny morning. You did your work, swept out the silos, and readied the crews for the threshing.

"Why not say: bottoms up?" was Dominik's opinion.

He had supped lavishly that day. He scraped the wax off a bottle and smacked the bottom with his palm. The cork shot out and spun into a corner. "Now listen, everybody! Bottoms up!"

The country was afloat with rumors.

The malcontent summed up the situation: "I'm still not worth a thought?" Defiance, that was Dominik. "Why not? What's to

stop me now?" He saw a cricket on the steps of Apanlee and ground it in the dust. His eyes locked hard with Hein's. His heart was pounding like a hammer.

"Today is today," he said, leaning forward. "And tomorrow is surely tomorrow." He pulled a German hymnal from his pocket, tore out a leaf, fished for tobacco in his pockets, and rolled himself a cigarette.

"You're wrong," said Hein, and stalked into the yard to saw some wood for exercise. The others sat in silence.

The day the European war broke out turned out to be a milestone day for Uncle Benny and his Dorothy, combining wrenching sadness with great joy, for fate would hand them their first grandchild, a perfect baby boy, demanding that they forfeit to the grave their only, much-beloved child—a girl whose name has been forgotten, who died as quietly as she lived.

So much has happened since that day that her existence seems unmemorable. What can one say of certain lives? She lived, a nondescript. She died with resignation.

Before she died, she bore a son. His name was Jonathan.

"She's turned into an angel with soft wings," said Uncle Benny, laying down his stirring grandchild carefully, unable to believe his lie.

The summer heat sat, trapped, high in the attic. His daughter somehow managed to give birth against enormous odds; now she was dead; fled like a shadow, no more to walk the earth—this on a day as dry as tinder, when all the fields were shimmering with heat and but a spark was needed to set the clouds aflame.

"She searched and found the perfect name," said Dorothy, who tried to hide her tears.

A grieving Uncle Benny stood in silence before the infant's wicker cradle. The winds were whistling fiercely.

"It is God's will. His hand is not shortened, as witnesses this child," said the Elders, for even while the mother died, she bore a sculpted son. And though this sudden childbed death was sad-

dening to all, you never saw such symmetry of face and limb in such a tiny morsel!

This little baby boy whom Dorothy held, weeping, in her arm's crook was blond and firm; its limbs were strong; it had the wished-for large, blue eyes; it had a chiseled profile.

"Weep not, for in the shadow of His hand He has hidden me so far," said Uncle Benny to his little love who shed her silent tears.

He stayed with Dorothy until she fell asleep, and only then did Uncle Benny reach for his pen and ink to write with fine, but shaking hand: "I grope for light as though I had no sight. If war comes to the steppe, death will mow down generations, leaving only stubble."

While the midwife was busily swaddling the newborn, while the Elders launched into their funeral prayers, Marleen stripped the bed while Natasha kept soaking the bed sheets. Dorothy kept dabbing at her swollen eyes while Hein, his big chest heaving with emotion, took his dead cousin to the hill to rest among her forebears beneath a soft carpet of grass.

That's when he spotted Dominik.

"The kaiser's war! The kaiser's war!"

And nothing was ever the same!

Huge rainstorms started racing through the sky. Bugles sounded. Bands hammered marches. Orthodox priests fingered crosses. The Apanlee Elders chanted their psalms. The tsar's army mobilized, and feelings everywhere ran patriotic to the hilt.

"God save the tsar!"

"God save his wife, the tsarina!"

"And blessings on the bleeder child!"

"Bread for his soldiers!"

"Bread or lead! Bread or lead!"

Professional thieves turned eager paper boys, beside themselves with animation: "Blood cousins—open foes!"

Incendiary slogans hung from every fence and blazed across the banners of the masses. The priests blessed everything in sight:

the *kulish* and the *paska*, the newborn child, the fresh, dark grave. The church bells mourned. People climbed on tables and chairs. The noblemen twirled mustaches. The Cossacks jumped upon their small, dark horses, knives clutched between their teeth.

It's strange about a war. A war is like a birthday—to mourn or celebrate?

Both feelings seemed appropriate. This war was no exception. Forgotten were the bitter quarrels between the landed gentry and the poor. Forgotten were poverty, squalor and shame. The Russian hamlets—wild with joy. The Valley of Jews—in chaos!

The frenzied rabbis kept running back and forth; their skullcaps sliding down. "Oy vey, oy vey!" they wailed, for they could hear the horses' hard, keen hoofs already hammering across the boundless steppe, across the sun-baked earth.

At Apanlee, the kettles started whistling as Marleen rushed her fattest rooster to get him ready for the pot. The twins just snapped their fingers at each other, ashamed of their pacifist roots. It was as if the very air was drunken with the headlines.

Shells started whining far away.

Bombs began booming.

The universe shook.

In the vicinity of Apanlee, the little boys kept practicing the Cossack dance, the *hapack*. The little females kept on curtsying, to show they had not lost their German manners.

The weather cock spun wildly. The meeting halls were packed to overflowing.

A fool broke into song.

A cat took to a tree.

Natasha just clutched her umbrella.

"So. Where did it start? How did it end?" the folks told Erika just recently in Reedley, California. "Who is to say, now that there's television, controlled by hidden hands, to tell you

what to think? There was a certain scoundrel, too close to the throne, about him the stench of the fiend—"

Imperial servants did his bidding. A crested eagle's carriage took him where he pleased. Of him, it was whispered the length of the empire: a devil in disguise. A blasphemer. A charlatan. A counterfeit and hypocrite. A spy in the pay of the kaiser.

The German empress would have none of that. Now more than ever, she counted on the monk to help the bleeder child. She saw naught but his glittering eyes.

A sainted man, said she.

A gross, crude fraud, said others.

Wastrel or wonderworker—who was to say? Both saints and sinners wear hair to their shoulders. Vagrants and vagabonds like to wear beards, as do prophets, princes, professors.

"Sin is to be used," said the malicious monk, "to drive out sin. The path to repentance—through sin."

At first, he was content to satisfy his needs with giggling peasant wenches. Soon, he cast spells into the lives of swooning ladies of nobility. The empress looked entranced when she but heard his voice.

She claimed he was a saint so powerful and wise that, when he raised his pockmarked hands, he could force streams to run uphill. His eyes had the magnetic light she craved. He told her black was white and white was black, and she believed, not the first to have fallen for folly walking Faith as though it were a creature on a leash.

They say she put her aching head upon his hairy chest. He filled her mind with delusions, her heart with soothing calm. He said to her: "Your eyes—like steamy windows."

She said to her surroundings: "Were it not for this man, a holy instrument of Providence, my little angel would surely die."

"What's on your mind?" asked the tsarina daily.

"Not much," replied the tsar.

A courtier spoke for him. "A bomb can explode on either side of the border."

The Empress fished within her skirts to find her smelling salts.

One word led to another, and in the no-man's land of their emotions, both sought a soothing echo for inconvenient thoughts. Both heard the fire whistle blow. The streets were littered with debris; the alleys, black with people.

She knew she was ordained by God and favored by His grace. The tsar fussed with his dominoes.

The workers, too. They hurt, and they bled, and they hungered; they howled: "A tsar—a war! A tsar—a war! Where is the head of the German tsarina?"

The monk heard that. He laughed so hard he burst a vessel in his nose.

"Let me now pray so the successor to the throne gets well," he told the empress softly. His pupils shrank to pinpoints. His powers flowed into the bleeder child out of the German House of Hesse.

"Saved once again, just in the nick of time," the tearful mother said, and kissed the hem of the pretender's shirt. She had blind faith in him and each day sought his counsel.

He spread ten greasy fingers to show the ministers who came to him, complaining: "See these palms? That's where the power rests."

He said to friend and foe alike: "You cut your father's throat if I as much as wink." His belly shook with laughter. He was carousing with the noblewomen and the court. "This war will be finished by Christmas!" He jabbed another belly with his finger: "When I say 'dance!' a wise man does."

In belted peasant shirt and dirty boots he walked across the steps that Peter the Great had erected, grinding with his heels the revolutionary circulars the wind blew from the gutters.

The monk advised the tsar: "Unless you do my bidding, you will not win your war." Behind his back he boasted: "I scratch the tsar behind the ears, and everything gets done."

He gave the tsar a triple kiss: "Why don't you cast aside despair? You'll win this war. You'll see." As hunger swept the

Russian cities, he played the balalaika and ate with hairy fingers.

"A saint, anointed by the Lord," said the tsar, taking desperate walks through the half-melted snow.

"God willing, faith can move mountains," intoned the tsarina. The glow of self-approval shone on her haughty face. She trusted the monk. She had Faith.

The torches smoked and sparked. The air was foul. The clouds floated, poisoned with rumors. "Dethrone the monsters in the palace!" the angry mob howled from below.

"How can a holy man do wrong?" asked the tsarina coldly, and lit another candle. "Share power with the rabble?"

The tsar replied to no one in particular: "I keep my fingers crossed. The road ahead is dark." He told his ministers: "I cannot see where all this might be leading." He crooked his little finger and kept on sipping tea. His ministers said nothing.

In rolled another sultry summer. It was a task to catch the tsar's swift glance.

"You salvage what you can," the courtiers warned the tsar. "You salvage while you can."

His wife had no such qualms. She turned white and gave a shudder in the sharp teeth of treachery. Her voice rose to a shriek: "God gave us our throne. Only God has the right to take it away."

The tsar began to mutter something about the malice of the universe, the worm in the core of the apple. The monk just held his nose. He flung his arms in a wide arch:

"It's Satan's brood. They are at fault. Each one I know wags several tongues at once."

He also said: "State secrets pass between them involving the entire globe, and all of them are foul."

A cross appeared above Peet Neufeld's grave, but no one saw the curious apparition except Ivan, who told Natasha. Natasha ran, as quickly as she could, to find a broken broom to jump across on her left leg and thus annul the omen.

"I leaped like a hare," she said to Marleen, who gave her a lopsided smile.

For good measure, Natasha consulted a Gypsy. The Gypsy told her it meant nothing.

"Pay no attention whatsoever," the Gypsy said and spat in a fine arc. "Why be concerned with trifles?"

Natasha was not yet convinced. She wanted to be hopeful for the future, because of Dominik, her son and, therefore, in her thoughts. She lit the fattest candle she could find. She lit it for a pouting saint she had neglected lately.

Hein said to Dominik: "Let's stretch our legs. I want to talk to you."

And high time, too. At Apanlee, times went from bad to worse. Hein said to Dominik, while giving him a sidelong glance: "I'd like to send you to Odessa to be apprenticed properly. I will do that as soon as I can. This year has been most difficult."

He spoke the truth. It was as if both heaven and earth had conspired.

Spring had been wet; next came too hot a summer. In years gone by, Hein could have talked most any friend into a short-term loan on less than two hours' notice, but now he learned, to his dismay, that rubles and kopecks were scarce.

The heat wave came and stayed. The springs dried up; the rivers turned to rivulets; the reaping yielded half the yield Hein needed to break even. Worse yet, trustworthy workers were hard and ever harder to engage. The war had pushed them from the fields and out into the soggy trenches; rifle butts kept pushing them into dilapidated barracks and dark factories where firebrands fueled huge, vociferous dissent.

Meanwhile, great swaths of Apanlee's soil went untilled. Illegal price jumps crippled trade. The future lay black and foreboding. Hein knew there would be no money left to pay for next year's harvest.

"Your mother," Hein explained to Dominik, "lived like a mouse before you were born. I want you to remember that."

"So?"

"She has a place with us. She always has her fill of steamed potatoes. She'll always find some hot soup waiting in the kitchen."

"So?"

"A devil drove your mother," said Hein with a small laugh, remembering. He gave his bastard son another sidelong glance. "Look here. Who gave you rides in the family coach? Who taught you how to bait a worm on a hook?"

"But why did you withhold your praise?"

"I did not want to give you dangerous ideas."

"Had I known that," said Dominik, "I would have laughed aloud."

"What do you want?"

"Two names. My own, and my father's. Stencilled in the family Bible."

"I'll give you an answer tomorrow," said Hein, but then that promise slipped his mind as well, and nothing more was said.

Then came the storm. It came with a force not the oldest of oldsters remembered. The winds swept the streets and the porches, and with them came a summons, calling Dominik to war.

Natasha wept with pride and consternation. Her Dominik, conscripted to become a hero for the tsar? Sent out to kill the wicked enemy, perhaps be killed to sanctify the cause? Natasha's heart beat hard with mixed emotions. She knew her son. She knew that any slogan was graven on his memory to stay.

Her grief was boundless, as the Volga. Her pride, just like the sun that only yesterday had warmed the bounteous earth. He could have chosen cowardice. He could have had his teeth pulled and thereby avoided conscription. He could have hidden in Hein's barn or else in the expanded attic—or, better yet, behind the wheat sacks in the granary Hein tried to sell in vain.

"Besides, he's still a bachelor," Marleen was pointing out; she still did not like Dominik. "Who'd miss him all that much?"

That day, the spotlight rested on Natasha, who started biting back. She did so with full gusto, for righteous motherhood shone plainly on her face. No longer need she feel ashamed that Dominik spent every winter on the stove.

She beamed into the crowds. She shouted for the twins to

help her celebrate.

They did not let her down. "Say, Dominik! I'll lend you my sheepskin," said one.

"You can have my watch," said the other.

"Let war not coarsen you. Do not forget to shave," Natasha told her son, to show that she had raised him to good manners.

She gloried in the neighbors' praise. Her eyes snapped with excitement. Her cheeks were cherry-red.

She watched Hein reach deep in his pockets. "Go buy yourself a pair of boots," said Hein, while slapping Dominik on both shoulders, man to man. "And a new uniform. The best is barely good enough. That is my firm opinion."

Hein was at his generous best. War made for generosity. The Faith of his German, pacifist forebears provided a brake, but where was it written that he couldn't harness his best Sunday horses and take the willing conscript from Apanlee in brisk gallop straight to the nearest conscript booth, about him the fields in slow circles?

"And let me know if you need anything. Anything. Just anything at all."

"If there is battle for a cause," said Dominik, and shrugged, "any trumpet will be an excuse."

Hein shouted for his horses, heart pounding with emotion. He was a pacifist; he strove to love both friend and enemy—but in times as heroic as these, that went against the grain.

"Just do your country proud; that is my one request," Hein said to Dominik who slowly licked his mustache. "If you need anything, just call on me. New boots? New socks? Soon enough, the winter will start gnawing on your toes."

"Hey, bottoms up!"

"God bless! God bless!"

And just remember this: that any foreigner who harms my country," boasted Dominik, enfolding Yuri with one arm and Sasha with the other, "is my decided enemy."

Dust puffs rose breezily beneath the horses' hoofs as Dominik set off that day to go to war for Russia—Hein by his side, the

twins behind him on the backboard, Natasha waving with her scarf and Marleen nowhere to be seen, glad that the thorn was pulled.

"Just you remember! Bottoms up!" were Dominik's last words. He gave Hein's mares the flick of a whip. Things never yet had seemed so good. He broke into an uncouth laugh while watching horses do what horses do, dropping their steaming apples, one by one, along the quiet and tidy streets that cut through Apanlee.

# Chapter 41

As overseas, three monarchies where crumbling, Noralee sat, several pillows at her back, her smelling salts in her pink bottle, her blue eyes round with terror, and wondered where it all would end.

It started with a bad cold in her head. Her illness next progressed to restless sleep and leaky bladder. She lost all taste for dumplings and red cabbage. Her own reflection startled her. It all was bad and getting worse. It was as Lizzy said: "There is no point in waiting for the sky to fall. Go see the Wichita doctors."

"What will my husband say?" wailed Noralee, convinced that she stood toe to toe with death.

Lizzy's tongue didn't curl with her lie. "He'll understand. Besides, it's only temporary."

Doctorjay looked lovingly at Lizzy, for he revered her as a weed reveres the sun. If anybody in this world, his old friend Lizzy understood how much it pained an honest healer—being forced to step aside for diplomas and black magic, making room for men with gold and silver, maybe even meadows in their names, the kind that treated a sore throat and called it laryngitis, dimin-

ishing his self-esteem. He still made rounds, as he had always done, his now ill-thought-of stomach bitters in his trousers, to help the neighborhood stay well. Allowing medical pretenders to annex the fame that rightfully belonged to him just went against the better instincts in his bones.

But he had reached his limits. He knew that now. No matter how he plowed his memory to help his Noralee, he could not find an herb to lessen her serious symptoms.

The Hebrew doctors said to Noralee: "By Christmas, you'll feel better."

He nodded, not convinced. "I'm willing to suspend my doubts." He battled his foreboding. He fussed and wrangled with misgivings. "But watch. Watch what happens next. They'll open her. From the neck down to her belly button. God knows what they'll discover."

No wonder Noralee cried out before her husband closed the door to leave her to the scalpel: "I just will have to die, that's all!"

It broke his fleshy heart. He was a helpless man, thus challenged at the core. He treasured Noralee; he stood by her through thick and thin, through varicose veins, palsy and gout, slipped discs, and even diarrhea. But this time it was different. He knew her illness was more serious than even she admitted. He knew Noralee; she did as she said; if she said it was time, it was time.

Lizzy rested her chin in her fingers. "You did all you could, Doctorjay."

He peered at her out of small eyes. He stroked his fading whiskers. "I'm not yet ready to foreswear my happy life with her."

"Of course not, Doctorjay. She will outlive you yet."

"That is my hope, God willing."

Between them was a sturdy bond. They had a solid marriage. As decade slipped past decade, the love between them grew. Together, they had added seven daughters and four sons to the prairie population while he was growing bald and round, much

like a July pumpkin, and she was growing wrinkled.

Now he mopped a perspiring forehead. He tried his best to mask his fear, but deep inside there was a knot that wouldn't go away.

"It's been a week. The bandages come off on Sunday. The scar, they claim, is dry and straight. They want to write her up. They urged me to sign my permission. That way not all is lost."

"That's wonderful."

"Her wound is healing nicely, as though she were a youngster."

"Of course. Why not? She's warm and snug inside her quilts. She will be home next month."

"God willing, Lizzy dear. God willing."

"The hottest summer, Lizzy," he said slowly, "must soften into fall." He bit into her apfelstrudel to show how much he valued Lizzy and blinked away his sentiment.

"Yes. That is true. And after fall comes winter."

"She was hurting too bad. It had to be surgery, Lizzy."

"I know. You can still do the finishing touches." She knew where he hurt—on account of his huge lack of schooling. For good measure, she added: "Stop fussing yourself silly. You're the best healer around."

"The nurses thank you for the cheese bits, Lizzy."

"Oh, that was nothing. Nothing."

There were effortless pauses between them. They deepened, and they grew. At last he said: "You know what, Lizzy? You're exceptional."

"Why, you're just saying that."

"I mean it. You're too modest." He still remembered how the ship had pitched and keeled while aiming for America; how Lizzy sat and wept for her young love swept into a watery grave, down at the bottom of the sea. But had that done her in? No. Had that defeated her? No. She'd pulled herself together, married Herbert, bred her cows, adopted electricity, not once mistook a flivver for the devil, placed many hundreds of crisp sheets on beds and couches to welcome far-flung visitors and never

wasted time on reading. Never!

He longed to drink to that. He fished in empty trouser pockets. "No, I'm not merely saying that. If anything, you are exceptional—"

If anyone exemplified the pioneer ways of America, the simple and straightforward life, it was this sweet and gentle woman, whose numerous kin were now dispersed throughout the wide plains, improving the country by voting straight Republican. He shot a sidelong glance at her. Did she surmise that, at such trying times, his mind was yearning for the comfort that firewater brought? A drink would do him wonders.

Immediately, she put a soft hand on his knuckles. "No," she said firmly. "You're done with that."

"I know. I merely—"

"No point in even trying."

He studied her discreetly. All members of her family were proud teetotalers. Jan never touched the bottle. Jan shook himself when Doctorjay as much as hinted—just shook himself as if he'd touched a snail.

"Do you suppose—"

She read his thoughts. She jumped into the challenge with both feet. "Why, yes! Of course! Here on the couch. Stay overnight. You know that you are always welcome."

How well she knew his fears! Without his flask, the birds no longer sang as happily. The sun no longer shone as brightly. Drink could turn foe into friend. Strangers were strangers no more. He smiled a rueful smile, stretched out his legs, stared out the window and at the ceiling, hiccuped gently, blew a perfect smoke ring, and rolled an apfelstrudel crumb between thick thumb and finger. "You are a top-notch neighbor."

"That's what you always say."

"By strength of will alone, you helped me overcome temptation, for when I look at Josephine, who nearly died with grief because I lost track of the day—" His voice fogged up, but he kept pushing on. "I know I am a sinner whose duty is sobriety. As Dewey always says."

For the issue was still unresolved. There was still Josephine. While he was warming his round belly, the icy night was feasting on her child. She never mentioned it to him, how he forgot the child, who lost his way and froze to death, but somehow, Doctorjay just knew. Both he and Josie knew; both carried that old scar.

"She has forgiven you."

"I know. But still—"

Of course she missed her son, but it was more. Much more. The loss of her first child, thanks to the elocution lessons, had done something to her. It was as if her mother's heart had lost its special warmth.

She, too, was aging modestly. The accident that took her son was like an ax that fell on a young tree; its blade still clove to her marrow. Her parenting came awkwardly.

There were no words in Mennotown to summarize a thing that catastrophic in a woman. Not since that firstling froze to death because he, Doctorjay, had peered too deep into his flask had Josephine been willing to have children.

She had them anyway. He helped.

He sat all night right by her bed and told her flivver jokes to help her pass the time. And only at the very end, when it was time to yield his chair and let the midwife sit, was he content that he had done his duty. Although a lot of what she said and did still went against the grain of Mennotown, he valued Josephine—one of the few who did.

For one, she hid her pregnancies. She wore her ruffle skirts and said no, no, and no! until she could no more deny the obvious, thus cutting Lizzy's baby preparations right in half. That was Josie; she came with a script of her own.

And little did her husband help, though Jan was attentive, as ever.

When Josie sprained an ankle because she crashed her bicycle, Jan found a maid for her. Jan even dried the dishes. His little Josephine was still the apple of his eye. He never said a word when Josie started ordering: a bread toaster, an automatic

cherry stoner, a wooden ice box, more!—all the modern gadgetry a female heart could dream to speed all kitchen chores.

Yet all in vain: that odd, peculiar weariness of spirit just never left her mind. At the rickety bridge where the accident happened, she'd sit, consoling herself with the silence around her.

Girl after girl—and she, more reclusive than ever. It was as if, with every pregnancy that sent the clan's hopes soaring for the son to fill the void the frozen child had left, her innermost essence diminished.

But girls were girls; you loved them, too; they started having boys. Each had more freckles than the other. And all of them won ribbons at the fair. Josie's girls were splendid, without a single mark. They came of proven stock. Those girls could do most anything, for Lizzy was their model—cook splendid Sunday dinners, spruce up the house for holiday guests, milk cows, make cheese, churn butter, raise chickens, weed rose beds, sew nightgowns from Butterick patterns.

Jan loved them dearly, one by one, though he deserved a boy as well with whom to share his willow pole down by the river bank.

"There is still time," said Lizzy, prodding, while having a quiet moment with her son.

"My heart clings to that thought," said Jan, who never gave up hope.

He didn't blame his Josie. He knew it had been tedium that wrought such heartbreak woe. To fight the tedium of life was all, as far as Josie was concerned, embedded in her nature; it wasn't just because his tongue played tricks on the poor little lad who fell into the snowdrift and couldn't struggle out.

His little tongue was silenced for all time. The angels wept that day.

She seemed to grieve extravagantly for many saddened years, but what it was she'd lost, exactly, nobody could discern.

Although her pain had dulled, a sadness had come over Josie,

like fog. The relatives sat on the sofa, prattling. They said to her: "Here. Have some decent food."

That cheered her up a little, but not much.

Her spirits barely lifted, no matter what they did. When she found energy to rouse herself and look into a mirror, she said to her reflection: "Well. Now you know. Don't ever claim you didn't."

She would talk to herself as though she herself were the strangest of strangers. She hunted for comfort in books, by the fire, her feet tucked underneath, her nose pressed into yet another paragraph, jotting down her cryptic observations in the margins. If someone spoke to her, she answered sluggishly, as if her mind was far away.

Jan smoked his pipe and watched the Sunday roast sizzle.

A holiday was still a holiday; the wall thermometer said sixty-five; the visitors were flocking to the fair in droves; three of Lizzy's tested recipes were entered in the competition; two stood a chance of winning.

"I wonder what goes on at Apanlee," said Josie next, out of the blue.

"Who knows? Who is to say?" If you believed the anguished letters Uncle Benny wrote from Russia, the riffraff kept on hurling stones to smash the onion domes.

"The letters he keeps sending," said Josie with a toss of hair, "are now postmarked Berdyansk. If you ask me, that's odd. In Russia, all is pandemonium."

"What's that to us?" said Little Melly softly.

Little Melly valued her prerogatives. When she came visiting, which she did conscientiously, she entered through the back door, not bothering to knock. She poured her tea into her saucer, so she could slurp it with more gusto. "Our house is not on fire."

According to Josie, it was. Something was sorely troubling her; she kept glancing at the watch that Jan had given her.

Little Melly started munching on a brownish apple core, while shushing Josie's cat. That cat was diabolical. Some people claimed that it laid eggs—that's why it crouched the way it did,

inside the oleander bush.

"And no wonder. No wonder. The newly formed government, chockful of Jews," said Little Melly next.

That wisdom came from Dewey. Most everyone in Mennotown saw eye to eye with Dewey on the matter. If there was mischief in the land, you could be sure it was a Levite, disharmonizing everything. Each Sunday, from the pulpit, that's what her preacher brother hinted before he passed the hat.

"Every bridge," her brother pointed out on many an occasion, "is either named to honor Jews or financed by the Jews, and when you cross that bridge, you have to fork over a nickel."

One day past April Fool's Day, the president of the United States got an excited Congress to declare full-fledged war on Germany. In Mennotown, where you heard German spoken the way it had been uttered centuries ago, deep in the swamps of Prussia, the war changed everything.

The spitballs flew. Nobody wanted to be called Herr Meyer.

Soon, rumors flew like paper bats: the Jews were pouring money into Russia in barrels, to help the country win.

Just what that meant was not at first revealed. Although there was a scary run upon the banks in Wichita, which frightened many folks, that scare passed all too soon. Only the Donoghues cried out, repeatedly, drilling with wooden guns: Bottoms up! Hey, bottoms up! Why, Jesus, Mary and Joseph!

Above all else, the war would galvanize the Donoghues.

First thing they did was shave off every mustache. Next, they put on their snazzy uniforms and stepped up catcalling. So eager were the Donoghues to get themselves conscripted to help America decide the war and make the kaiser lose that they kept stepping on each other's toes before they disappeared in various flimsy barracks, but not before they muttered underneath their breaths: "Watch out! Watch out! We'll get ourselves a Hun!"

The Donoghues had always been against the government, at odds with every rule. Now all that changed. The war made out of them respected patriots. A yahoo could become a hero.

No longer were the Donoghues the butt of everybody's jokes. No longer did the neighborhood accuse them openly of thievery. In fact, the citizens felt such obliging spirits they held a farewell picnic for the Donoghues, who stood there, grinning broadly, provisions, maps and compasses securely fastened on their backs.

"Peacemongers," sneered the Donoghues, derisively, their beady eyes on Mennotown, "are creatures worse than rattlers."

In Mennotown, feelings ran high and crested higher still, but patriotic loyalties to Germany and even Russia were dwindling ever lower. This was America; the folks were Americans, now. Each side on the old continent was driving hard to win, but the outcome of the global struggle was anything but clear. The Jews of Wichita had several anxious moments. The Yiddish signs were taken down because they sounded German.

Doctorjay cracked his knuckles with tension. He had heard it from Dewey, who had it first-hand from a source he had long since forgotten, that the Austrian archduke, who started it all, was pierced in the jugular vein in a knavish, nefarious, treacherous way—but what had that to do, if anything, with banksters in New York?

It must have been as Dewey said: "*Geld. Geld.* That's what it's all about. It's always, always money!"

A broad smile sat on Dewey's face, for he was full of glee.

He fetched his hat and took his leave, leaving unspoken words behind. Jan's pipe smoke swirled behind him.

Little Melly heard the latest news, eavesdropping on the rural telephone. She reported to Lizzy at once.

Both women checked on Josie's calendar, and sure enough—her Saturdays were marked with tell-tale Xs all the way down to July.

"I can't believe my eyes," whispered Lizzy in anguish. "Is there no end to unwelcome surprises?"

"You know what that means. Away from pots and pans."

Those words made Lizzy flinch, for Josie was a relative—no

way around that fact—hence worthy of her loyalty. But did she, Lizzy, know—did anybody know?—a single soul who didn't scoff at kosher diets, bingo games, the suffragettes, the labor movement, and the libertines? The drums beat a long roll. What would be next? Transparent stockings? Penny dreadfuls? Emancipated novelists?

When the suspense grew much too much to bear, Lizzy cleared the tension from her throat to get to the root of the matter. "You're going again to a meeting?"

"I am."

"It would be a Christian meeting, we hope?"

"Hope never hurts," said Josephine.

And to herself: Amsterdam! Oh, Amsterdam! That's how she talked, if only to herself.

But Lizzy was not easily put off. Lizzy gulped air and pushed on, her nose slowly filling with tears. "Their hidden agenda is nobody's secret. I'm telling you. I'm warning you. They'll pull the lead out of your hem."

"My name is mud already."

Those were dark days and darker nights. It was exasperating. It taxed all understanding. But Lizzy got her second wind, thanks to the Holy Ghost. "Not you, Josie? Surely not you? Tell me I am mistaken. You couldn't possibly become a—"

"—a what?"

"I cannot bring myself—" The word stuck in her throat. Only a women disowned by fate—too skinny, too ugly, and hence without a man to keep her calm—could find herself endangered by the suffragettes. Jan's Josie did not fit that mold. Yet still, there was that void.

Still, she was different. Sad.

Sad all the way through Christmas rush and summer fair, sad even though she sat right in the lap of luxury; her kitchen had linoleum. She owned more household gadgetry to help her speed her various chores than any housewife worth her smocking frame could ever wish to own.

# Chapter 42

The previous year, a frost had killed the best part of the winter wheat. When spring came, finally, the balmy season did not last; three weeks of rain drowned every seedling; times went from bad to worse.

The road to Berdyansk had the texture of glue. Vast acres lay deep in a mire of mud. Hein had kept grain reserves, in hopes of selling in a pinch for needed rubles, but how to get the burlap sacks to the strike-crippled seaport Berdyansk?

All trains had stopped running. Mills had no fuel. Newspapers died. Rumors abounded. Disgruntled workers stood elbow to elbow.

"The Empress has the evil eye," the workers told each other, crossing themselves in fear. The candle tongues kept licking on the icons.

The banks closed their books on Apanlee, and Hein defaulted on three tractors. A Jew drove up one Sunday afternoon and had them hauled away.

The flies sat thick and silent on the ceiling; Hein's tongue began to run away. He couldn't help himself; the taunt slipped

out; no way to take it back.

"That race belongs to Satan," cried Hein, and added, driven by his wrath: "The canker rash on them!"

The half-smile faded from the hunchback's lips. Thrice he tried to find his voice, and when he spoke at last, he said: "I ask forgiveness for the thought. I cannot shake it off. The reckoning is here."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"This is about the haves and have-nots. I've often made that point."

Hein sucked his pipe with force. "I'm sorry, Uncle Benny. But every day I hate it more. I hate what's happening to us."

"It's bad now, and it will get much worse."

Hein looked at Uncle Benny, already sorry for his harsh words. But his anger had not yet been spent. "Do you still cultivate the Hebrews?"

"Come rain or shine," said Uncle Benny calmly.

"Whatever for?"

The cripple did not speak at first. At last, he cleared his throat. "Hein, take my savings. Take it all. Just pay me back when times are mannerly again." The invalid leaned gingerly against the water pump. He leaned against most anything to give his spine support, and this is what he said:

"Times lie ahead, Hein, to make grown men and animals moan."

The war was hard on everyone—hard even on Marleen who still put jam into her tea and butter on her zwieback.

She turned for comfort and assurance to Natasha. "It's cold in here. Go get another log."

Natasha was busy dressing a blister. "I will. I will. As soon as I am finished. There will be frost tonight."

Marleen was in no mood for arguments. This pregnancy was difficult; she hoped that it would be her last. The coal smoked in the samovar. She sat there, shivering, as though within a draft.

"I worry. That is all."

Natasha, too. She worried, fussed and agitated about the measles season, for it was said the princeling was covered with spots. Had she been in the palace, she would have cured the bleeder boy expertly. She knew precisely how: one perfect onion, two gherkins and three thimblefuls of goat's urine, mixed with a bit of spittle. Natasha believed in the curative powers of urine and spittle. A child was a child; a fever a fever. No doubt he was light as a feather. Chances were he needed fattening. She longed to hold him, cuddle him and hum his woes away.

Natasha moved her icons from corner to corner to give them additional light. The priests kept bleating to their saints while the tsar took his leisurely walks through a violent, foreboding spring and an ominous, darkening summer.

As famine stalked the granaries of Russia, the war dragged on and on. There was a serious rifle shortage at the front, while snipers hid behind church steeples.

Entire cities mutinied, and beggars starting rushing orchards, pulling apples, half-ripe, from the trees. Wherever you looked, you saw disorder. Pilfering. Plunder. Food riots flared in many places, and endless bread lines wound around the block.

Somebody shouted suddenly: "The Germans are hiding the flour!"

Another shout, and louder. "Because of the Germans, we're fighting and losing this war!"

Fall came, and brought a rush of blazing colors, predominantly red. The workers stood in knots, the winter at the door.

On the horizon, clouds piled atop the earth. The wind started shrieking. Rumors flew wildly, believed and remembered by all:

"German spies are hiding behind curtains in the palace and stand concealed behind the thinnest blade of grass." Before the year was out, the simplest peasant knew: "The Germans are stockpiling grain."

A chant became a roar. A Hebrew dissident, his hair in curls, his tongue aflame, hurled leaflets into the waiting lines of workers.

Foreigners, all!
Away with them, all!
To the ash barrels, all!

The third winter of the war brought bitter cold and, with the howling winds, the murder of the monk. The fierce, magnetic glance was snuffed by lead and cyanide, and people hugged each other in the streets.

The tsar took walks to calm his shattered nerves. If he picked up a pen, he spattered himself.

The German Empress donned a fluffy dress. She looked as if she had taken a vow: "I shall never forgive nor forget."

The street lamps hung dark in the cities. The railroad stations had no light. The *droshky* drivers disappeared. Factory workers stood elbow to elbow.

Rage fed on rage. Fists rose in hut after hut.

The beggars chorused everywhere: "A piece of wood to warm us. A heel of bread to feed us. Is that too much to ask?"

All blame fell on the foreign-friendly crown—two slow-wits on the throne of Russia, and straddling a volcano. The poorest peasant started shouting: "This war is not our war!"

The angry mob was howling: "Malicious foreigners control the Winter Palace."

Now that the monk was dead, most everywhere reigned pandemonium. The demonstrators waved their flags. The workers filled their pockets with sharp stones. Rifles and bayonets protruded from windows as soldiers rode train buffers. The mob hung out of dirty buildings, swinging banners, shouting fiercely at the masses, who shouted back and waved their placards high.

"Down with the Emperor!"

"Death to our enemies!"

"Shells for our guns!"

The country turned into a kennel. The Russian peasants took their pitchforks and started looking for the tsar.

A balding man, whom history calls Lenin, rolled in a sealed and bolted train across the Russian border, heading north. A

dwarfish man with faded eyes, now known to us as Stalin, was heading south out of his icy exile, past the bleached bones of countless beasts, by dog and reindeer sled.

Uncle Benny watched the sun set in an ochre sheen upon the Winter Palace before it darkened all of Europe, just like the lights that dimmed the auditorium before the eerie play began.

"I must go home," said Uncle Benny to a young companion. On previous trips to Moscow and St. Petersburg, he had seen and heard sporadic demonstrations, and his hair had prickled in his nape.

"I know."

"We will not meet again."

"I know."

"All of my people's prayers," said Uncle Benny to the Russian, "will be like feathers thrown into rough wind." His legs were trembling from the strain of a long day on cobblestones. He shifted weight to take the pressure off his spine.

The young man said: "Let the end, then, be our beginning."

Foreboding spoke in Uncle Benny: "For centuries, the land has lain in bondage. The peasants have been wronged. A wedge is being driven deep. Deep down below, a hurricane grows. Well then. Good-bye forever."

His Russian friend stood silent. At last, he touched his hat: "The saints be with you always." He stood outside the train, with worry peering in.

"The saints be with you, too."

"A forest of soldiers, this city."

The train jerked once. The wheels began to move. Hoodlums clung, sprawling, to the roof of every train that roared and trembled between St. Petersburg and Moscow—in olden days, a journey of twelve hours. Now it took several days.

"Find me a bearskin, please," the hunchback told the porter.

The porter turned his back as though he had not heard.

"I'm not the enemy," said Uncle Benny softly, but there was

no reply. Night started dropping from the trees. The railroad ties ahead of Uncle Benny ran unbroken to a black horizon.

"I ache for Dorothy," he thought. He closed his eyes to hide the mist that clouded his thick glasses. He listened to the clatter of the wheels, the whistling of the locomotive. And then he started praying.

An intellectual, he was a man who rarely prayed, but now he did; he prayed. "May the Lord be so kind as to grant onto me—" He was ashamed of his covetous prayer. He started shaking uncontrollably, silently, convulsively, out of an atavistic knowledge that even prayers were too late—that all the dice had been long cast by centuries.

The war had turned Natasha's cuckoo's egg into a celebrated hero. When Dominik came home on furlough, he even picked a violent quarrel with the foreman, and no one said a word.

"A spark into a powder keg. Like so. Like pffff!" laughed Dominik.

He liked to laugh at his own jokes. More now than in the past, he spoke of Revolution. He did not seek it out. It came to him as fire comes to cinders. It licked around his youth like flames that lick a log.

He listened closely as a good friend from Poltava explained it all to him, this thing called Revolution, that would set mankind free by leveling the rich and hoisting up the poor.

"War on the past! And peace for the future!" his friend had told him, grinning.

Natasha was there; she laughed. She laughed like a child that was tickled. It happened on New Year's Eve. She knew how to laugh like a child. She couldn't help herself; she always cheered when others cheered, by nature tractable.

A jolly party it had been, friend piled on top of friend in her ramshackle, smoke-laden hut. Natasha melted wax in a snowdrift outside and threw its shadow on the wall to forecast the shape of the future.

"We'll drown the fools in blood," bragged Dominik. His

friend had brought along a loaded gun with which they were wounding the night.

Now Natasha poured oil over porridge. "A headache deep within your skull?"

Dominik picked with a straw in the gaps of his teeth. "Make an important wish."

She felt her feet go numb. "What are you saying, Dominik?"

Just as a juggler showed his tricks, so Dominik. He threw his knife into the air and caught it by the blade. "Just make a wish. I guarantee it will come true."

She studied him at length to recognize him clearly. "Still wishing for instant success? Here, take this piece of soap. And scratch your nails out, too. Tonight, you're invited to supper."

He pushed open the door to the summer room and stepped across the threshold. "Look at me now. On behalf of the tsars and their lackeys, I offered my chest to the bullets."

Marleen gave him a slanted smile. "Don't tell us stories, Dominik. Hot coffee? Tea? Here. Have your fill." Marleen was not impressed. "A hollow windbag. That's what you are. A windbag. Nothing more. Don't tell us braggart stories."

"Two sugars, if you please," he told her. "No, better make that four."

"No waste in my house," said Marleen, but did as he said.

He sat, while sipping slowly, sprawling, watching her. "Hey, you! I always meant to ask: your grandfather was born in Russia?"

"That's right," Marleen said. "My great-grandfather, too."

"Why do you still speak German?"

"Because," Marleen explained, dumbfounded at the question, "the Gospel is written that way."

"Any German in my country," he said softly, "is a spy."

"Any hoodlum in my kitchen," said Marleen, "is unwelcome."

But he was undeterred. He spoke of poison gas and cannon fire and shrapnel pieces burrowing into the groaning earth. "Defending my homeland," he boasted. "From exploiters and for-

eign intruders."

Here's what he said in Marleen's sparkling kitchen. "I've learned to kill four people with one bullet."

He said to the twins who sat silent: "I rented a girl for a ruble."

"Your mind, as filthy as a horse tail in the spring," said Dorothy at last as firmly as she could, which was astonishing. She seldom spoke like that. Her hair was white. Her face was fine and soft. She sat there, upright, by the window, as clever with her hands as always, while smocking on a tiny bit of cloth to spruce the toddler, Jonathan.

Dominik spun around and fixed her with a cold, mean stare: "Tell me. Where is Ivan?"

"Why, dead and buried in the apple orchard."

He let fly with a choice set of curses.

She sat, and she waited him out. "You know he drank himself to death. You never even liked him, Dominik. He beat you black and blue."

"Well. Didn't he?" asked Dominik, and sucked in the air through his teeth. His glance was now fastened on Hein.

"Did I do what?"

"Did you not beat me, too?"

"I never beat you, Dominik. I only spanked you, reasonably, when your disorderly behavior called for discipline."

"Go sleep off your hangover," ordered Marleen. Her tongue was still sharp, but now she weighed her words.

"A braggart, as always," she said to her husband, who added a log to the fire.

Hein laughed uproariously when he was told by Dominik that Revolution was now right around the corner, or else around the bend. Hein let out a bellow with such force that Uncle Benny's cat took one large, running leap and disappeared around the corner. "And you at the heart of it all? Don't talk such nonsense, Dominik! If there's something rotten, there are maggots to live off the stench."

Expertly, Natasha moved closer. She was proud of her son who was willing to die for the tsar, but forbearance was part of her nature. "There's a toad on your tongue. Spit it out, Dominik! Spit it out!"

She, too, had been molded by the centuries. The serfs had waited for three hundred years. No limits to the patience of the poor. That was her attitude. But Dominik just laughed. "Don't expect me to stretch out my neck for the knife."

The hunchback did not like that laugh. He braced himself before he spoke: "Now, listen, Dominik. Take a deep breath. Just calm yourself. Exactly what does Revolution mean to you?"

"Plenty of everything. Land. Livestock. Watches. Gold." He knew, by then, that Revolution stood for things that challenged everything that centuries had built.

"This, too, shall pass," said Hein, unwilling to be counseled, for skirmishes had flared before, and squads of Cossacks with their whips had always put them down.

All this was ancient fare. Many a dissident had, in the past, tried hard by drawing on complicity and cabala to liquidate the tsars. These plots had always boomeranged. The traitors had been hanged. This time, however, things felt different.

"This time," said Uncle Benny, stubbornly, "the throng swings hoes and shovels. A tidal wave of hate—that's what's out there, this time."

Hein flicked away a bit of ash that had fallen from his pipe. "But why? What have I done? I do not understand. I am rich; that is true. And why not? But with riches come duties. As long as you balance your riches with duties, you are safe and secure in the palms of your Lord."

"Just listen to the slogans. 'The past to the grave. To the peasants, the earth.'"

"—any trumpet will be an excuse," said Dominik again.

That day, he was so angry that not even butter would have melted in his mouth. He drank vodka; his face became redder and redder. He knew what he knew: barracks and factories

belched out their hate. The names of the tsars, a sneer and a curse. "If Revolution ever comes—"

He stood no more than five feet tall, but he was muscular. He was missing two front teeth. He stood before his father, his hands deep in his pockets. A hand grenade was slung across his chest; an ammunition-laden bandoleer cut a deep groove into his shoulder blade. The smoke of gunpowder clung to his clothes. In his voice was the growl of the wolf. He was unable to explain why his pockets bulged with rubles.

After Dominik took off to finish the tsar's war, Hein paid a visit to Natasha to talk things over with her. He often sought Natasha's presence to talk of this and that.

"Have you had word of Dominik?" he asked.

Natasha inspected the seam of her apron. "He sent me a picture he drew."

"Oh, really? I didn't know that Dominik could draw."

"He does. He draws quite well." She pulled a piece of paper from a fold within her sleeve. "Look here. He draws for his mother's amusement."

Hein started to laugh. "The rascal! He's right. The kaiser looks like me."

Natasha said slowly, avoiding Hein's eyes: "You better shave it off."

"But why? You always liked my mustache. Did you not always like my mustache?"

She smiled a wistful smile. "In olden days. The olden days are gone."

He shook his head. "Look here, Natasha. Why pretend?" He was at ease with her. "I'm fair. You know that I am fair."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Have I not always tried to be fair?"

"You have. You have." She gladly gave credit were credit was due. She gently stroked the back of his hand, but that was as far as it went. "I didn't say you hadn't. But times have changed. Remember that."

He wouldn't take no for an answer. He moved a bit closer, an eager seducer. "Look here. I found this ruble in the street. I wonder, now, who lost it?"

She felt a faint burr in her throat. "Just go away. And don't come back again."

He stuck both hands deep in his pockets. "There's more. There's jingling money here. What might I do with it?"

"Marleen is expecting again."

"It's probably her last. She's getting on in years."

"Ha! Don't tell me! Last year you told me such a fable."

He leaned toward her suddenly, a spring about to uncoil. "I did? That was last year."

"And the year before that. Four years ago. Seven years ago. When will it ever end? You want me to swallow your lies? "

"Will you have the boiling water ready?"

"Nine children in the twelve years," she scolded him expertly. "One under each arm. One still around my neck. Three hanging on my apron. The last one, barely older than a tot! "

He liked to tease, just as he liked to tickle. "She has a magnificent husband!"

The Russian servant looked at him with a sober and steadying glance, withholding sharper words, as ever, befitting her station. "I live too close to the margin," she told him, and pushed him away with a small, practiced shove. The universe was fixed. It didn't matter if she planted her cucumbers in an exact crosswise pattern, just as Marleen had done.

What could she say? Marleen bore the offspring. Natasha swaddled them.

Each time Marleen bore another, Natasha found herself so eager for the suckling she kept pushing the midwife aside. A diaper soaking in warm suds, a little pink rump in her palm—that was Natasha's happiness.

Just give her a newborn—she melted. She had that wide, warm lap to rock its fears away.

Hein knew her well. He started petting her. "There was a time," he told her softly, "when I knew all your needs by heart."

"I lament my old shoes."

"Of late, something has changed. What is it that has changed, Natasha?"

She opened her mouth and closed it again. She smiled to herself, only half-understanding. "I don't know what you mean."

She nourished few illusions about the world in which she lived. Her needs were simple, earthy. She longed to hold another baby in her lap and nuzzle its soft neck. She scrubbed the diapers, one by one, until she nearly dropped.

"I want to know. Tell me."

"You know already. Don't you, Hein? Some things just can't be helped?"

But Hein pressed on. "Tell me. I really want to know."

She shook her head. She only knew the furious fits of jealousy were gone. "I have my memories, she said. "And they are pleasant. But I have now enough of them and really need no more."

He reached for her hand, but she pulled back her fingers. "Go back to Marleen. That's where you belong, in the dark times ahead."

He nodded. Natasha was right. No bitterness at all within the soft and aging bosom of Natasha. On good days, Marleen had admitted as much.

# Chapter 43

When war broke out, America was not prepared, and there was catching up to do. The shortage of weapons was hotly debated in Congress, but factories sprang into action, new industries appeared out of the blue, corrective laws were passed at every legislative session, and every bird hummed mirthfully, for victory was just around the corner. Young men were drafted from the fields and sent to wet and windy camps where they commenced to exercise with broomsticks, since rifle production was still gearing up.

Trumpets sounded. Messengers scurried. War maps arrived in gaudy colors.

Before the year was out, the war was being waged full tilt. The *New York Times* declared in flaming editorials that the victorious war was knitting citizens together into the fabric of America.

But where was the yarn? And who did the knitting?

A silence fell after the question.

Invisible as spider webs. And dangerous as ticks.

A lot of strangers passed through town and asked, replete with sneer, their eyes grown narrow in hatred: "What's this? A

mystic German sect?" They tapped their foreheads several times and smirked derisively.

The Russian-German prairie pioneers felt wronged. It wounded all of them. For it was true; they were still pacifists; they had a higher Lord. But in the meantime, what?

Not one of them had doubts that they were genuine patriots. While their hearts bled for Germany, and Russia as well, their loyalties belonged to Kansas. For decades, they had been Americans.

To illustrate that fact, the menfolk joined in victory parades, and never mind the blisters. The ladies kept on knitting socks, and never mind for whom.

The papers kept up the barrage. The papers hinted: spies! Odd noises came out of the telephone lines.

Spies, claimed the *New York Times*, now infiltrated everything; you couldn't even trust your neighbor. In Dewey's church, the worshipful were circumspect with whom they took communion. There were spies in the pews, it was said.

No wonder, therefore, that many cautious citizens searched out the enemy within. Most people knew that, in most any war, you could find saboteurs and tricksters.

Next on the national agenda was how to deal with them. Uprooting spies became a patriotic duty. The arrows flew. The word was out: you had to be on guard.

Informers working for the enemy recruited help from would-be patriots, the preachers told the flock. The Finkelsteins, for instance, talked Josie into rolling Red Cross bandages for them—and what was in those bandages, to be shipped all the way to Russia, was left for you to guess.

Soon, patriots were thoroughly confused. They wanted none of that. It came to light, for instance, through diligent investigation, that spies had poisoned several batches of livestock feed. Next it was said the Germans were at fault.

The papers kept it up.

The flickers said the same.

The headlines started shouting that German spies were sabotaging factories. Spies filled your ears with pessimistic stories about the outcome of the war, belittling the bravest of soldiers. Spies, saboteurs, and foreign tricksters stirred up a bloody strike at Bethlehem Steel that paralyzed the plant for weeks.

In summary, spies sympathetic to the kaiser were undermining everything. That was the paper verdict.

Here was was corrosive business. Spies saw everything. Spies heard everything. They watched who talked to whom. They took note of the smallest remark. They even checked the mail. No doubt these self-same saboteurs were at the bottom of the outrage why Uncle Benny's letters no longer came to Kansas.

From one world to another, greetings no longer flew. Many nights, this saddening development stole sleep from Noralee and Lizzy. Both of them cherished that soft spot for Uncle Benny and his little love, whom they remembered well, who never turned her back on a deserving beggar. They still remembered how the little cripple looped his letters, but many other memories became a hazy blur.

It took some effort now, for instance, for Lizzy to recall the hunchback boy who stole her heart when she was young and he was small—just stole it with his black and clever eyes, and never gave it back. Now he was getting on in years. She thought the world of him. She thought of him a lot.

Even when he was little, mused Noralee as well, he needed a chair to support him where he stood. His business was thinking and dreaming. His hunchback gave him pain, but he would not complain, just rest on any bench within his reach, his eyes on ancestral portraits.

Because of his affliction, Lizzy knew, he did not have to work the land; he had studied in Odessa as a youth, which was the reason, doubtlessly, that he had started writing on the themes that were of no concern to farmers. He'd grown into a mild and patient man, thought Noralee, who bore nobody harm, who wrote his editorials and sipped his tea and watched his Dorothy, thus

making a career of thinking.

All that was long ago. In Lizzy's mind swam faded memories, while she kept tossing through another prairie night, as the moon shone its light through her window.

"He'll write as soon as times are mannerly again," said Josephine. "And in the meantime, let's help Russia. Let's put goodwill to work."

Lizzy took her heart into her hands and sat Josie down for a heart-to-heart chat.

"Even the sparrows are chirping your story," Lizzy gently pointed out.

Josie inspected the tips of her fingers. "They do? What do the sparrows say?"

"They say you help the enemy."

"We're on the side of Russia. America is backing Russia."

"We're pacifists. We're not against this war, but we're not for it either. Why do you have to benefit the Finkelsteins?"

That just popped out. Once it was out, it all came gushing forth. The list was long. The sins were old.

"We've got to watch ourselves," begged Lizzy wretchedly. "Why give the Finkelsteins a hand? No good can come of that."

She had a barrelful of proof. For one, the Hebrews had no sense for harmony. Their conduct was not circumspect. Their Sabbath was on Saturday. They robbed the world through usury. They didn't lend you money, no matter what your urgency, unless they charged you interest that turned into a noose. And some of them wrote poetry that had no rhyme nor reason.

Now that a war was on, their oddities were even more pronounced. Some headed south and disappeared below the Rio Grande, while others, staying on in Wichita, just shrunk into the shade. She knew that Jews were for modernity, which undermined all rules. They kept on snipping at their hems to show not just an ankle but a calf.

The gentle graces fell away: "What's wrong with us? We are your kin. We love you, Josephine."

"So?"

"Must you surround yourself with Hebrews? They aren't on our side. They are against the Germans. They never liked the Germans. They never even liked the Russians. They overthrew the tsars."

Josie took a struggling breath. "If you must know: it's not the Jews. It's not the Unitarians. It's not the Methodists. It's not the Lutherans, even."

"Who is it, then? What plagues you, honey child?"

"Well, it's no secret any more. I might as well come out with it. I've joined the suffragettes. Now, are you satisfied?"

Four shrieks came from the davenport. One faint, and that was Little Melly.

But Josie's temples were now pounding. "Do you folks understand? Do you know what that means?"

"Yes," whimpered Lizzy. "Yes. of course. I looked it up in the fatbook."

"Voting in this country is denied to criminals, lunatics, idiots and me."

"Why would you want to vote?" cried Lizzy, quite beside herself. "I never heard such nonsense in my life! Jan votes for you! You know he votes for you! Is there a better man than Jan who cares more deeply for his wife and for his girls—and votes accordingly?"

"I am no better than a cow. My function is to keep on calving."

"Don't be absurd. Why be so coarse? That's what you learn from them. Don't use such purple language, Josie!"

"I have no legal rights. My daughters will grow up and live and die and have no legal rights."

"You have more rights than you could possibly use up. Why, you can order anything your little heart desires from the wishbook."

Here's what she said, the heretic: "Jan's rights, and nothing more. My rights, and nothing less."

That's it, said Josie, digging in. It's of no consequence to me

if you agree or not.

This was too much for even Noralee, who was accustomed to allow for human frailties: Let Doctorjay be whatsoever Doctorjay might be, when push came to shove, she did as he wished her to do.

Little Melly was coming to, whimpering softly. "I knew it. I knew it. The blasted suffragists—"

"It's not the suffragists. It's called the suffragettes."

"Who cares," cried Little Melly hotly, "what name they give themselves? That does not change the facts. Those meetings are a Jewish trap. The goal is to destroy the family."

"They are my friends. This is America. I can have any friends I choose."

Little Melly's face was pitted with blotches. "If I were Jan, I'd be ashamed to show my face at the Wednesday night Rotary Club."

"Hah!"

Lizzy planted both fists on her knees. "Let's have it out. Right now. The talk of the town is that you want to join. You want to be part of the Rotary Club? Tell me that I am wrong."

"Why can't I belong to the Rotary Club? What's wrong with that? What's wrong with me? I'd love to belong to the Rotary Club. That's only one of my ambitions."

"Are you a man? What would you do there, Josie?"

"What does a man do there? They slap each other on the shoulder and tell each other flivver jokes. I can tell flivver jokes."

"If you are undermining your own man, you undermine the family."

"My man," said Josie in a trembling voice, "cannot be undermined by some old flivver joke. Right, Jan? Tell them that I am right!"

In anguish, Little Melly's eyes' sought out Jan's, home from the fields, in need of a cool drink. She thought her heart would break with pain and shame and woe at seeing him diminished. She rushed to his defense. "Jan! Jan! Speak up. This is the moment to speak up."

Jan's eyes went from female to female. He puffed on his pipe and said nothing. His heart was wide and soft. He loved his peace. He loved his hearth. He cherished his niche at the Rotary Club.

"Well, Jan?"

What was a man to do? He loved his wife, but he loved Lizzy also. He loved his sister Daisy, who winced at every clash. And, yes, he still loved Little Melly, by then restored sufficiently from her deep faint so that she didn't have to miss the slightest nuance of this domestic squabble. His females chorused, unified: "Speak up, Jan. Speak your mind."

"Just once," said Josephine in a low voice. "Just once stand up for me." A current passed between them: it was full of sparks. She held her breath. Jan looked from face to face, drew deeply on his pipe, smiled a conciliatory smile, and did what most men do when challenged to decode the psyche of the female. He said precisely nothing.

"Give me five years," hissed Josie, falling back. "We have a plan. Before this decade runs its course, we will have skirt Rotarians."

"Jesus! Jesus! *Jemine*!"

"You mark my word! You people mark my word!"

"Jan! Make her stop. She's feverish!"

"It's now or never, son. You must lay down the law."

"Jan, can I tell a flivver joke?" asked Josephine who never knew when to leave well enough alone. "I have a brand new flivver joke I want to tell right now." There was no stopping her. She launched herself as though she were a cresting wave. "Here's one. Here's one for you. Here's one I heard the other day. Here's one for Dewey, see? You be the judge if that's a flivver joke or not. If that's a scream or not. There was this man, this flivver owner, see? On his death bed, he asked that his flivver be buried with him—"

Jan tried to make the best out of a ghastly situation. "I'm afraid, my dear, that no one in this kitchen—"

"The point is this," shrieked Josephine, "he wasn't sure about

his Faith! But he was sure about his flivver—" She took a struggling breath, but finished what she started. "—he knew there was no hole so deep," she cried, delivering a stinging blow, "his flivver couldn't get him out!"

Five stony faces stared at her, unblinking.

Wartime was sacrifice writ large. Wheatless Mondays. Meatless Tuesdays. Heatless Wednesdays. Porkless Thursdays. Gasless Fridays. Only weekends were left blank for you to show your patriotism any way you pleased.

So, here as there and then as now: a unifying enterprise—a good and righteous war! The politicians had it pat: war business was good for the country. Before the year was in full leaf, Sedgwick County's war chest started bulging with donations.

Jan's mill kept humming merrily.

The government bought Lizzy's cheese.

Officials out of Washington sent order after order to purchase brown-shell eggs from Noralee.

The grocer upped his cantaloupes from a nickel to a dime, and no one said a word.

Bonfires flared in every park; from every speaker, music roared. Doctorjay ruddered through victory picnics—there were seven in rapid succession—while struggling down many a demon.

He raised both fists, a patriot. He struggled through a muddle of feelings: he wanted Germany as well as Russia to win, with the credit adjusted for Kansas. In fact, insisted Doctorjay when spotting Josephine, he wouldn't be surprised if Jan himself said: "Bottoms up!"

For such was the spirit of the war.

The only question of significance—the only moral issue of importance—was where you stood: for or against the kaiser.

The war forced Dewey into overdrive. His task was finding ways and means. His homilies were in demand as they had never been before, for old and young relied on him to hunt for defini-

tions in the Bible that spelled the difference between a patriotic pacifist and an unpatriotic shirker.

Before the war, before so many strangers started sneering, before draft officials came to Mennotown to muddle everything and sow dissent by means of innuendo, nobody doubted German immigrants were loyal Kansas patriots. For years, they'd had barbecue pits on the Fourth of July and laid on a band with trumpets and drums. But abstaining from war was the dictum, preached Dewey. To shoulder a rifle was wrong.

He was rolling a boulder uphill.

The young men listened, full of scorn. The war cartoons stung to the core. Now, it was clear, democracy came with a bill—and some folks weren't willing to pay. Could you attend a potluck supper, the males of Mennotown now asked in angry voices, and refuse to bring your own dish? Oh, how they wished—especially the bachelors—to bag themselves a Hun!

"Be steadfast," preached Dewey, perspiring.

"We aren't chicken feed," grumbled the bachelors, just itching to take up the gun. "You want us to bolt from the war and run just as fast as we can?"

The Elder Dewey sat with them behind the gravel pit, where they would gather, scowling, to talk sense into them. "Here's what the Bible says—" He took the matter one step further, philosophically. Why not take Lizzy for a model? If Lizzy had her way, the world would be a dairy!

The youths were not persuaded. "Ha! Aren't we the laughingstock of Kansas?"

The argument taxed Dewey brutally. He knew that, biblically, the dirty business of killing human flesh was wrong; you did that only to the animals; the Bible made allowances for that. But a Hun was a creature apart—subhuman at the very least, demonic at the worst. And patriotism counted, too; he stood in quicksand past his knees; here was the best of prairie towns, packed end to end with blond, hard-muscled sons, refusing to seek shelter in the Gospel. Their faces were red with their shame.

The Elder strove for compromise. He sought a middle ground,

but *jungvolk* smarted from the sting of implied cowardice. The shirker label was like dandruff; you tried to overlook it, pretend it wasn't there. But everybody saw.

"For generations back, we have been pacifists," the Elder argued heatedly. "No matter who the overlord. No matter what the provocation."

"That's just a lot of hooey!" the bachelors replied.

To counteract the mounting pressure to enlist while showing patriotism, Dewey helped uncover spies by ferreting them out of hiding. One foggy morning, he went to the Mennotown Chamber of Commerce and said to the uniformed clerk:

"I'll make the rounds. No one will think it's me."

He trained his ear for suspect accents. He scrutinized the town's assorted flivver stickers. With jutting chin, he stood and watched the kaiser burned in effigy in front of City Hall.

Next, Dewey saw to it that in his presence the government, the president and/or the Constitution were never criticized. Had he not been a pacifist, he would have raised his country's hidden traitors' heads high up on a pike; he was that charged with wrath.

Little Melly made no exception of herself. She felt as Dewey did. She spent her days in an excited flutter. An unaccustomed vigor drove her on.

"You wonder who's behind it all," she hinted sagely to Daisy.

"You do. You do," said Daisy, having no idea.

"We're not yet at the bottom of what ails Josephine."

"I feel it in my bones: where will it end?"

"You tell me that."

"Does it not make you tell that we are in—"

"—that we are in for a surprise," was Little Melly's soft reply, still wagging a smooth tongue while sewing slacks for Archie to grow into.

Which brings us now to Archie. When war exploded across Europe, he was still shedding teeth. He was a laggard academically, but otherwise a paragon of virtue—and no wonder.

When Schoolmaster Menno—still teaching, though barely, loath to let go, though it was time for him to settle in his rocking chair and let the war-torn world pass by—opened a McGuffey reader, asking sternly: "Tell me, children. Look around. Who is the honest fellow in this story?" who else but Archibald? He knew he was the one. He always raised his hand. His source was Little Melly.

His auntie spoiled him wantonly.

Little Melly could not keep her pudgy hands away from Archie's mended trousers; she straightened this and that. She took great pride in making sure he knew exactly right from wrong. "Now, Archie, listen carefully!" admonished Little Melly. "Your father is a pacifist. Your mother is a pacifist. You are a pacifist. You are a little soldier for the Lord. Here. Blow your nose. Blow hard. That's it! Good boy! Once more! Make sure they understand just where you stand. If someone hits you, don't hit back. Our Savior suffered, too."

"Yes, Auntie Melly," sniffled Archie, while contemplating, a sinking feeling in his stomach, the heckling menace of the Donoghues.

"Don't let them frighten you. You don't hit back, no matter what. Just stand your ground. You hear?"

He sneezed a lot. He wheezed. He carried on imaginary conversations with unseen people in the room. He developed hysterical coughs. Sometimes he even ran a temperature at will. Books gave him blinding headaches.

Thus, school was torment magnified. He used up too much pencil at any little task. He was always last to finish up his papers, the first to shoot out through the door. He saw no sense in hunting after commas.

And Josie's girls, by contrast! Those girls were packed with talent. They could do anything. They helped the war along. They made candles out of walnut shells to help raise funds for amputees. They could stuff birds, trap rabbits, raise frogs, and make assorted dolls for orphans out of old, discarded corn husks—all with their right hands tied behind their backs. Josie saw to it

that all her daughters read voraciously, although she had been warned repeatedly by Doctorjay that certain books, read prematurely, impaired the brain and brought on chronic female ills.

By contrast, what could Archie do?

Two years into the conflict, and at the mercy of an aunt who made no bones about her *Kuckuck* clock and smelled up the entire neighborhood with *Krautrolladen,* he fought a war on his own shores, not having any other choice. Each morning, before eight o'clock, he had to cross a school yard—just packed with schoolyard bullies.

He would have sooner crossed an ocean!

He was one persecuted little pacifist—between a hard stone and a rock. He had already given up pretzels, his favorite after-school snack. He had survived a bout of the "liberty" measles. He did what he could, but it never sufficed. His loyalties were suspect.

He attended parades; he cheered at patriotic rallies; he volunteered to light the fireworks; he banished his Low German accent.

No matter! The bullies had singled him out. Each day, it was terror reborn.

No matter how he tried to fade into the woodwork, as soon as he showed up at school to cultivate his mind so he could climb the ladder to success and catch the American dream, the Donoghues were there, and waiting with their slingshots.

"One hundred percent American," shouted Archie, poor fellow, and ran just as fast as he could, but couldn't shake the pack that followed him, the anti-German mob that heckled: "Chicken! Chicken! Chicken!"

The bullies made a ring around him. A howl went up:

"Let's gun the Hun! Spies tell lies!"

Somebody grabbed him by the shoulder and started spinning him around as though he were a top.

"Kill Kaiser Bill! Kill Kaiser Bill!"

"Spies tell lies!"

"Gun the Hun!"

He was no match for them. He never had a chance. No matter what he did—no matter how he hunched his shoulders to make himself invisible—no sooner did he show at school and try to blend into the crowd, a bully stood there, smirking, to wrestle Archie to the ground and paint a mustache underneath his nose, and then his, Archie's, ethnic anguish would begin.

So on this fateful day.

Archie thought his lungs would burst as he fled the fury of the mob. But he was small; his legs were short; his heart quite paralyzed with terror. He tried to hide himself, as often as not in the outhouse—no use! "Run the Hun! Gun the Hun!" the cry went up, the moment he pulled up his trousers.

It was survival, base and raw. He decided to brave the first corner. He cringed and tried to duck beneath the bully's elbows, a useless undertaking. The bully lunged for Archie, who staggered from a strong and vicious shove.

"Let's see now. What's that in your brown bag?"

"Just liberty sausage," lied Archie, surrounded.

"With sauerkraut?"

"It's victory cabbage. Victory cabbage. Leave me alone." Huge tears were welling in his eyes.

"It looks like sauerkraut to me."

"It's not."

"It smells like sauerkraut to me."

"It's not."

"It must be sauerkraut. Right? Sauerkraut?" The mob was gathering momentum. The other children hooted.

"Rooshian! Rooshian! "

"Spies tell lies! "

"Kill Kaiser Bill!"

"Run the Hun! Gun the Hun!"

"Rooshian! Rooshian!"

"German chickenshit!"

He started hiccuping. He didn't know why he was singled out for torment. Was he a German? Was he a Russian? Both, the

bullies seemed to think.

He gave out a desperate whoop. The Donoghues did likewise.

One of them, coiled, ran his hard skull right into Archie's stomach. The impact brought him to his knees.

"No! No! Please, don't!"

It was too late. Blows started flying in blind fury. Fists started pummeling his cringing body. "I'm not a spy! I'm not a spy!" he whimpered, terrified. Mind paralyzed, his brain on fire, he struggled underneath. He tasted the sickening taste of warm blood.

"Kill Kaiser Bill. Kill Kaiser Bill!"

Somehow, he struggled free. He ran.

Show weakness, and the mob will charge. The end result could have been prophesied—a slingshot, and a rock, smack in the eye, exploding his vision. It felt like the kick of a mule.

Turn on your television set. There's Archibald, your syndicated televangelist, black patch on his right eye, lost to an ethnic hate attack. His left eye sees a mission. He is your basic redneck fundamentalist, vociferous and militant. It's muddle, mostly. Never depth. In favor of the melting pot, yet opposed to Affirmative Action. He preaches love, but hate is what propels. Hate for his roots, mixed up with righteousness. He hates the Huns. He hates them with a passion. The moment he hears "ethnic pride," alarm bells ring; he sees the smirks, he hears the heckling voices, he even smells the *sauerkraut.*

He has no use for ethnic pride. No isolationist is Archibald, and very proud of that.

He has no use for Europe and its bedeviled tribal ghosts—the reason why, when it comes down to helping yet another nonwhite country to its feet, he tells his congregation: "We must export democracy." It's Archibald who prompts them how to vote.

# Chapter 44

The flickers were the newest fad in Mennotown, and catching on like fire. A Jew had built a flicker house, down by the Mail Coach Road, before the city fathers realized what was happening and could assess the impact on morale.

"The Devil's workshop, verily!" said Dewey, stepping up the pace of his sermons, but soon his flicker crusade petered out.

Opinions on the merits of the flickers were divided. Some were of such enormous patriotic fire that many Mennotowners came running in to see.

"A fabulous array of razzle dazzle," claimed Josie, by then nearing flicker addiction. Each week, she forked across the five-cent admission the Jews kept raking in.

"The flickers will destroy the peace of the community," Dewey predicted many times, but flicker shows were here to stay; the war forced every Elder to make concessions to modernity and secularity.

Although the Bible warned against the danger of the graven image, the Elder Dewey gave a bit; in fact, he gave a lot. The

fires flared; the world perched on the edge of ruin—by sheer comparison, what was a flicker house? War was war; emotions were cresting; even the tomcats were licking their chops. No one raised an eyebrow any more when Josephine, skirts flying, jumped up on streamer-decorated flivvers and roared away with Doctorjay to see the latest rally and wave at US soldiers, all brave beyond belief. The citizens of Sedgwick County, united in their feeling that the war changed all priorities, went every week to watch the flicker actors fling their pies and whack the Huns hard on their skulls with baseball bats for being Huns—hence creatures worse than vermin.

The audience roared and clapped.

The war forced other concessions from Dewey. He learned to close an eye to extra chrome on bicycles, to football games, and even cross-sex conversations on the telephone. What harm a flicker house?

"But only matinees," he said at first. "And only Saturdays."

He closed one eye while keeping open the other.

He set himself beside the door to watch who frequented the flickers. He didn't come right out and say you shouldn't go; he jotted down who went, and if your name was on his list, you knew that there would be a public scolding that only a hefty donation could stop.

His list of flicker visitors grew long, and one of them, to his chagrin, was his own sister, Little Melly.

"Amazing! Amazing!" she breathed. She didn't admit to it out loud, but the flickers did something to her. When Mary Pickford swooned in Douglas Fairbanks Junior's arms—all smiles and rippling curls and dimples—the spinster's heart stood still.

But Dewey pointed out: "The Levites pay her salary!" and that was that; no further argument. She backed away obediently.

That was the last time Little Melly put herself into the path of modern sin. Instead, she waylaid Doctorjay who had a tougher psyche.

"Tell me. Tell me. What did you see?"

*"How Bridget Served the Salad Undressed,"* teased Doctorjay,

who could be crude beyond belief.

Little Melly near fainted with shock. "No! Doctorjay! You're making fun of me. Why are you making fun of me?"

"Look here. Get this." Doctorjay slapped at a fly that lighted on his balding head. "Don't be so dense. The punch line is: she plain forgot to put the dressing on the salad."

"Oh!" exhaled Little Melly, and sipped her catnip tea.

Not five strong horses would have hauled Little Melly inside a flicker house again to watch a film so gross, but she could prod; could she not prod for more details pertaining to the flicker craze and keep herself informed?

"Read this. Read this," urged Josie, still widening her mind.

She kept on clipping articles predicting pending victory. She shared the news with anybody with the urge to keep himself informed.

The other females, too—all of them, patriotic. For instance, Daisy had her cousins in to feast on her liberty patties. Little Melly gathered every peach pit she could find to save for filters for the gas masks. Lizzy sent six cows straight to the slaughterhouse and, with the money thus obtained, began a special savings chest for future amputees.

The relatives stopped coming with their pillows; instead, they spent their energies in organizing charities. Not even Dewey, still staunchly pacifist, dared quarrel with the merits of the war, except in theory and principle—the war filled up his church collection plate as it had never been filled before. When Dewey came canvassing nickels, dimes and even quarters, there were no questions asked about just where the money went. Nobody would have dared refuse an earnest contribution.

The slogan now was unity. The aim was now to win. Even Noralee, still wan from her last surgery, sat straight up in bed and announced with flashing eyes: "Another twenty years!"

Forgotten were the symptoms that had puzzled Wichita's best doctors. She declared that she wanted to live; the war spelled excitement; she now spoke only English to her chickens; her

accent practically disappeared.

Only Lizzy was strangely silent. If German was forbidden in America, how could you tell a doctor where it hurt?

"The Lord prefers High German," said Dewey when at first consulted. He soon changed his mind, and no wonder. The war was rough on foreigners.

Who was he? A Christian, naturally. But: American? Or Russian? Or a German? Perhaps a little bit of each?

When he concluded a speech on that challenging theme at the Wednesday Night Rotary Club, there was thundering, roaring applause, though none possessed the answer.

Jan, a first-generation immigrant, felt just as torn as every other Mennotowner when it came to his ethnic roots. His obligations stretched both ways. He longed for victory, yet felt the war was wrong. He hoped America would win, but what about the Germans? And what about his birthplace, Russia?

As a small boy, he rode the creaking wagons into the heart of Kansas. Did he not owe a debt to this rich land that gave him soil the likes of which could not be found the length and width of Russia?

And yet. Behind him stood four centuries of ancestry that had refused the gun. They stood there, and they frowned.

Jan took off his glasses and put them on again, and still his ethnic pride was looming. He lit up his corn pipe, but didn't start to puff. In the end, he went to a Wichita Finkelstein bank and bought fistfuls of liberty bonds.

All was a colossal dilemma. The war machine tore ethnic pride to shreds, and Mennotown was no exception. The Stars and Stripes were in. The papers, the placards, the nickelodeons kept hammering it in: all Germans drooled distinctly at the mouth, and all Americans were heroes.

Before the year was out, you could not find a single home in Mennotown still proud of its old roots.

Everything of German origin fell into ill repute.

All German-language schools were soon declared invalid.

When Archibald saw a small dachshund pup lift his hind leg and let go with a quiver against a fire hydrant, the twelve-year-old paused briefly, stood back, swung wide his leg, and kicked it in the ribs.

"The thrones," cried Josephine, "are now collapsing everywhere." Her eyes were wide, unseeing.

"The last time Uncle Benny wrote," said Little Melly evenly, a dimple in each cheek, "did he not mention those diversionists?"

"You mean subversives. Right?"

"It's all the same to me. It all spells bolshevists."

"It's bolsheviks."

"I said, what is the difference? They're all out to destroy."

"Humanity is on the march! A new age dawns! Time for the New World Order!"

Like a storm-tossed sea, Josie's feelings ran high and then higher. It was as if she longed to throw herself into a gale that soon would turn into a storm. "In Europe, all is pandemonium. It's bad! And getting worse! It's mayhem now. Just mayhem. And small wonder!"

"*Ach Gott!* Again? Not now!"

Lizzy dropped several stitches in a row and fell into a soft whimper. If you were smart, you saw the pattern; you understood who was behind it all—behind the agitation, behind the labor movement, behind the brand new income tax, the Feds, the suffragettes, all that. Nefarious forces were at work. Why make a bad thing worse by adding oil to flames?

Take Josie, face aflame: "A witches' Sabbath, over there, if you believe the papers. "

"That may be so. It's none of our affair."

"Unless we take a stand and help democracy along—"

Lizzy put on her spectacles to survey Josie better. The edge of her own tongue grew sharp. "I've said it before, and I say it again. It's not our business, Josie. This war is not our war. We've been pacifists since a horse could be bought for three shillings. Stay out of it. That's my advice. Lay off. No need to get mixed

up."

But Josie's penchant was to snub advice, no matter how well-meaning. She throve on turmoil more than any Donoghue.

"I want my life to have an impact on this world," she argued heatedly, never at a loss for words. "Next week, I'll join the International Red Cross. Our folks in Russia need our help. We'll help. That's what we're all about. That's what America is all about. I know no better way."

Lizzy gently wiped her fingers, one by one by one. "Stay out of it. That's all that I can say." She no longer had a sigh to spare for Apanlee. She, too, felt sorry for her beleaguered kinfolk there who were in a bad fix, but now she could take it no farther. She was deep into peppernut season.

But Josie was not easily derailed. She claimed she had the facts right at her fingertips—the length and width of the Ukraine, now ringed with the fires of wrath. She swallowed slogans, spit them out again; she didn't even need her index finger to trace a knotty word. She argued herself silly.

The west, claimed Josephine, had broken into full gallop with steam, and electricity, and thunders for equality, but tsarist Russia—a land mass dark, obscure and mostly ice until the summer broke—was still a sleeping brute, unwilling to be prodded, and let nobody try!

She turned into a woman possessed.

Whenever she could spare a minute, she took herself to Wichita to attend her mysterious meetings. She put her stock in Russia. In the old, tranquil days before the war, her book reviews were everything; her novels filled a void. Now books no longer mattered. Her half-finished poems she flung in the fire. She fetched her best taffeta hat, tucked her two braids inside, stared at her face inside her looking glass as though she saw a stranger, and took herself to Wichita, with Abigail in tow, to help the Finkelsteins.

"We're planning ways and means to get relief to Russia," is what she told her family.

"Who's we? Must you cavort with Jews?"

But Josie only shrugged. Not one word more than that.

Three times a week, come rain or shine, she kicked her slippers underneath her bed, put on her heels and stockings and disappeared, behind her Abigail.

The war gave Josie wings. She burst forth like a prairie fire.

No longer did she wait for life to begin; it was here. It was as if a wave had come and washed from Josie's feet the tangle and the slime that had imprisoned her.

She said: "Chop your own wood, and it will warm you twice."

Next thing that happened was: she twisted Jan around her little finger and became a paid lady typist.

"This contraption and I are made for each other," insisted Josie, looking happier than she had looked for years. What thin veneer of modesty and self-restraint she acquired through the years at great costs to her family dropped from her life like ashes from a phoenix.

Before the year was gone, she donned an eyelet dress that showed her upper arms. She bought a blouse that separated from her skirt. She rode her bicycle and bared a rakish ankle. More than one Elder took a stand—it was an aberration.

She even cut and bobbed her hair. She threw away her Sunday corset. She claimed it pinched her in the waist.

"It barely lets me breathe," said Josie, willy-nilly, and threw it in the trash.

At her new job at the Red Cross, she worked long, grueling hours, well into the night. From morning till the moon came out, she sat there, peck-peck-pecking all day long, as though she were a woodpecker. Her family hoped that the novelty would wear off. This, sadly, did not happen.

"I'm having a fine time," smiled Josie. "I'm having a wonderful time. How can a Singer compare?" That was all you could get out of Josie.

So taken was she with her Red Cross job she would forget to eat, even though on more than one occasion Doctorjay would

clear his throat and speak gravely.

"Now, Josie, listen. All that pecking on those keys can't do you any good. It will trigger your female disorders. You aren't getting any younger. You know your change of life is just around the corner."

"Don't start on that again."

"I have Jan's interest at heart."

"I said: don't start again."

The healer's Adam's apple danced. "It isn't yet too late. You might yet bear a son—"

But Josie laughed, no, not a chance! She told him bluntly when he nagged: "Oh, hush you, Doctorjay. I thought you were my friend." She outguessed every motive. She tossed her hair and said: "It's good for me. I get my exercise. Three hours' walk. On foot."

No longer was Mennotown dreary. "It's battle with no holds barred," she told him, thus silencing him deftly. No longer did she spend dull afternoons, with nothing to do, with time on her hands, counting the cracks in the ceiling. Forgotten was the ever-present worry of still-unmarried daughters. Not even Dewey's much-recycled sermons were the vapid exhortations everybody, in the past, had heard a hundred times before and learned to endure without falling asleep. Even he breathed fire—blue fire. He held forth on the Gospel zealously. He had his work cut out. "Onward, onward, Christian soldiers!" That was his battle cry. The church pews shook. The dust fell from the ceiling. He made sure—double sure!—that everybody understood he was a Kansas patriot who flew his paper flag stuck on the windshield of his flivver.

He told the folks to render unto Caesar, just as they rendered unto God, and render unto both they did—there was no counter-argument. His Thees and Thous peeled thunder! He told them what to believe, and how strongly, while passing the collection plate—for widows, amputees and orphans.

# Chapter 45

Soon after the Red Revolution, after hoodlums had hoisted the hammer and sickle atop the onion domes and put a bloody end to the abuses of the tsars, Natasha had gone to Marleen and told her, fearing mischief:

"I found the garden gate ajar. You better get a lock and chain. The tsars will not sustain you any longer with their bayonets."

Together, they buried the Apanlee heirlooms—the silver, thimbles, coins. Unspoken was the resolution: not even Hein would know. A man was a man, and a woman a woman. If someone put a knife to Hein's left temple and tried to lift an eye out of its socket, she knew that Hein would tell. By contrast, take Marleen. Or take Natasha, for that matter. What was another secret, more or less? A woman's heart, both knew, was used to keeping secrets.

Natasha watched Marleen from the corner of her eye as both dug deep beneath the trees. Each guessed the other's thoughts.

At last, Natasha spoke with face averted and little quivers in her voice: "I'll always treasure that fine samovar you gave me long ago, Marleen, while in a remarkable mood."

"A dented one. I had no use for it."

"Not so. A splendid samovar."

"It did not mean a thing."

"Still good for many years of use."

That was no idle discourse. Both knew the reasons well: of all the places plunder-worthy, not one matched Apanlee.

By then, a band of cut-throats and marauders—their thighs glued to their stolen horses, sharp knives between bared teeth—had fallen into several German settlements where many cousins lived.

First, they had hanged an Elder who resisted. Then they set fire to his church. They splintered the doors; they shattered the windows. They looted, burned and killed all night. Then they fanned out to the surrounding manors.

There they set fire to the barns and mills, the stables and the granaries. They crashed their rifle butts into the gilded mirrors. They ran their bayonets into the burlap sacks that held next harvest's grain. They ransacked cellars everywhere and smashed the cherry jars. They overturned the spindles in the attic. They gutted sheds and chicken coops before they took off, their wagons packed high with their loot. Everything was hauled away: spoons and forks and silver thimbles, samovars. German-brand grandfather clocks. The dead lay where they fell.

Natasha's bosom heaved with wrath. She busied herself with the babies: "Who cuddles you? Who swaddles you? Who puts you on the potty?"

She was a maid; she knew her place. Her people needed her. "Just count on me," the servant told Marleen. She never left her side.

Marleen's cheeks turned a deeper hue. Both knew with growing clarity: one day it would arrive, the torrent of the Antichrist, unfurling its black flag.

Then what? Marleen's palms grew clammy at the sound of the clatter of hooves, the rattle of iron on iron.

Natasha waited patiently for Dominik to come and tell her what would happen next, now that the old was smashed, the throne collapsed, the Winter Palace taken, the ministers arrested, the future bright with hope. Would he come back and tell her what to do with all the freedom she had gained?

She watched Hein and Marleen kneel in the empty granary. She watched old Uncle Benny. She watched his Dorothy. She listened to the Germans pray in unison: "Lord, pity us, for we are trembling. The earth drinks the blood of our kin."

She told no one that she still pined for Dominik, but he had disappeared from Apanlee as if he'd been a rock dropped in a lake—a speck of dust gone with the dethroned gods of yesterday. None cried a tear for Dominik.

Natasha didn't waste her time on speculations either: she was busy—busier than ever. The measles in the nursery were in full swing again. She did what she had always done. She sat guard by the Apanlee cradles.

Would he come back, her troubled son? Or was he dead by now, having given his life for a cause now as cold and as black as the night? And well might he have died! She was sure that the country would always remember. Nothing said about how she might survive.

Natasha looked inside herself and tried to listen hard. She merely heard the silence of the forest.

The day was cold. The muddy streets lay frozen. Berdyansk had hushed to terror and despair.

Torn flags proclaiming: "Freedom! Liberty! Equality!" hung from dilapidated rooftops. The streets were in a pitiful condition—crumbling sidewalks, broken glass along the gutters, sagging fences, gaping walls. Rats shot through potholes in slithering runs. The houses lay in darkness; storefronts were hammered shut.

A bandit stalked about the cobblestones. He wore a pistol in his belt and on his back a rifle with a bayonet. Hoar frost glistened on his collar and nested in his hair.

A hunger-swollen peasant, recognizing him, saluted eagerly: "Dominik! Hey, Dominik! Hail! Hail to the World Revolution!"

"Hail to the World Revolution," the bandit replied, lifting an ardent fist. "We have driven the ogre away. Haven't we? Haven't we? Huh?"

The bandit gave a narrow smile that showed his broken teeth. His boots left indentations on the dirty, hard, packed snow. Four stiffened bodies, swinging rhythmically, hung from the branches of a tree. He elbowed one, albeit playfully, then kicked aside a loose piece of debris.

"Exploiters. Abusers."

"We'll hang them. One by one. What's there to stop us now?"

The muzhik muttered, trying to oblige: "Let's grease the rope beforehand."

"Right. Right you are. Let's grease the rope beforehand."

The muzhik overcame a stammer. "Let's use the new broom wisely."

The bandit licked his lower lip: "What do I smell? A counter-Revolutionary?"

The muzhik clicked his tongue in fear. "Where? Where? Show me so I can beat him."

"Just kidding, Comrade. Kidding."

"Right, Comrade. Ha! A joke."

"Let's hang them, one by one."

"Let's fan the flames of brotherhood!"

"Scurvy and typhoid to the exploiters!"

"Blast the worm-eaten monarchs!"

"Triumph to the proletariat!"

"And power! Power! Power to the people!"

"Rob all that has been robbed of you," the bandit told a ragged urchin next, spotting him beneath a pillar. "It's now or never, son. Just go ahead. This is a free and equal country. The New World Order has arrived."

"You're through?" the urchin asked.

"It's now or never, son," repeated Dominik. "Just go ahead, I said." He turned the corpse beside the gutter onto its belly with his foot. The flags were snapping in the wind as if they were red whips. "This sucker here? Just a damn fool—that's all!"

The urchin scurried closer, like an eager rat. The bandit stood and watched. Now that the Revolution had finally arrived, corpse piled on corpse; there was no end in sight. He'd been a fool, this one, now lying in the gutter stiffened like a mouse, having resisted an order to show his identity card.

"He lived a fool. He died a fool. He will be buried as a fool—that's all!"

"Right! Right!" The urchin grinned at Dominik while emptying the dead man's pockets. This netted a surprising find: two onions, a mildewed sausage end, a gnawed-on heel of bread.

"Give me the onions. Keep the rest," said Dominik.

"Here. Here!"

"Son. Let me show you. Slash his soles. Rip his seams. Cut open both his pockets. Just keep on looking; there is more; he's dead; he won't bite you. Trust me."

The urchin's hungry face broke into a grateful, toothless smile. The bandit watched him for a while, shelling stale sunflower seeds.

"Whatever strikes your fancy is yours now, son. Your property. All yours," he said again, and lingered. The boy reminded him of times not all that long ago: how hungry he had been himself, how thieving and conniving.

"The land is yours," the Revolutionary flyers said. "So are the homes. So are the orchards. So are the rubles the foreigners keep hidden beneath grain."

All his life, he'd coveted what others owned. Here was his chance to settle an overdue score.

A whirlwind summer it had been for anarchists. The mob poured thick into the cellars of the rich and climbed into the attic of the pious, confiscating horses, loading onto stolen carts whatever struck their fancy: livestock, grain, machinery, furniture, clothes, saddles, harness, firewood. Dominik had joined in glee-

fully, trampling down the cabbage fields and watermelon patches.

Hail to the Red Revolution! The feathers flew. Prayers died on bloodied lips. For Dominik, it was a heady time.

He couldn't wish for more. Any door could be axed open, any window smashed at will. Cupboards, drawers, trunks and boxes could be ransacked, and not a soul to stop an honest hoodlum! Amazing what torture could do! The point of a needle pushed under a pinkie—astounding!

You led a farmer, white and silent, to a corner of his granary, and he came out, once you were through with him, sporting the colors of an Easter egg, his tongue loosened nicely, more than willing to reveal the hiding places for his silver and his gold. A topsy-turvy world—this world brought on by Revolution—where fat, complacent farmers hid in hedges while hooligans could freely walk the streets, now game for any twisted cruelty—rifles on their shoulders, sabers at their sides, pistols in their boot shafts, and mayhem like a sweet, seductive song on their besotted minds.

That's how it was for Dominik.

He scooped sunflower seeds out of his pocket and slowly sauntered on, spitting shells while reminiscing: just why did he hate them so much?

He and the fools of Christ had been friends. He and the twins had shared games. Had they not even shared a spacious nursery? Had they not shared Hein Neufeld's pride when they won foot races against the slower neighbor fry on watermelon days?

That was, he told himself, before he grasped the full extent of avarice. Exploiters, all! To the ash barrels, all!

He didn't even understand how small discords had grown into such major grievances—just bits and pieces here and there, small slights that kept on festering, small, irritating hurts that added up as though somebody slammed the abacus.

Then came the war. It brutalized. The war added teeth to a festering, ill-defined wound.

Small mischiefs grew into a major thievery; that thievery, in turn, had landed him in jail. There he had time. There he could

brood. Jail time changed everything. For two long years, all time stood still for Dominik. There were no calendars in the forgotten dungeons of the tsars.

At first, he inspected his past and found it too petty to warrant the hate that he nursed. There was humiliation, to be sure. There was disgrace. Mortification. Shame. All that, and more. His hate just grew and grew.

A cell, seven paces long, three paces wide, that caged eight violent, angry men, had helped him hone his hatred. Filth. Bedbugs. Cold. A bowl of soup but once a day, fish heads swimming in a grayish liquid. A trough outside, a zinc container, where he could wash, but only once a week.

Somebody told him once: "Unless a miracle occurs, you are as good as dead."

No wonder that he listened when, in undertones, the prisoners kept arguing the merits of the Revolution. Some left at dawn to be shot dead; more came in every day. The new arrivals told him—as they lay on the stony floor, exhausted, famished, and embittered—that the tsar wasted lives in an unneeded war.

"A lot of foolish men are dying in the trenches," they pointed out to Dominik, "so foreigners can keep on dunking zwieback in the coffee."

His mind spun in a loop.

The blow had been long prophesied, but when it came, it left the country reeling. One day the prison gates opened and Dominik was told: "Now beat it, Comrade. You are free."

For Dominik, the Revolution was a yellow shaft of light. It came to him as fire comes to dry brush.

"The monk is dead. The tsars have been sent packing. Get on. Get lost. No time to waste on questions."

He looked around. Did peace bells ring in Europe yet? Nobody knew. Nobody cared. The earth smelled of stale blood. Strangers embraced him in the streets and kissed him with wet smacks: "The New World Order has arrived! Look for a new direction!"

He ran. He ran from the past just as fast as he could. He jumped an overcrowded train, hung front to back with streamers. The train raced through the countryside where hordes of people milled about, all shouting hoarsely: "Long live freedom. Long live anarchy."

"Enjoy your freedom, Comrade! Enjoy the birds!"

"Long live anarchy!"

"Hooray!"

"Hooray!"

"Hooray!"

He shouted until he was hoarse. He screamed until he spat blood. He looked about in a daze and knew: the spark that he had nursed within his breast since he had been a little boy had sprung into a roaring blaze. The wind was in his favor.

Now! Fire to the mills! And fire to the manors!

He found himself a peasant's scarf, a rattling cart, a sheepskin, and a pair of skinny horses.

"*Paschol*!" he shouted hoarsely.

With angry heels, he stomped into the soil of Russia the People's Revolution. He hooted at the burning embers. All this, and more! And mayhem ever since! For the Germans, it was like the end of the world.

In highest spirits, Dominik walked on while contemplating leisurely what he might do for further entertainment. Pride almost burst his skin, for he no longer passed unnoticed. Left and right, a lot of lesser men saluted smartly:

"Let's fan the flames of brotherhood!"

"Scurvy and typhoid to the exploiters!"

"Blast the worm-eaten monarchs!"

"And fire to the granaries and mills."

He sidestepped several queues with great impatience, while cursing softly to himself. There they stood, shivering, the half-wits of Berdyansk, patiently waiting for bread, for salt, for a dozen foul, frozen potatoes.

"Why! Don't you know a better way?" he sneered, and

crudely elbowed one. "Search your heart. Just what are they to you? Just foreigners! Exploiters! Will you miss them, once they're gone? Just shell them with your teeth and tongue. A shower of dead flies."

"No justice, Citizen. No justice," said the man, hugging himself for additional warmth. He had stuffed newspapers inside his shirt to break the force of wind.

"Bring justice with your gun butt," said Dominik, disgusted. "Probe for justice with the tips of bayonets, as you would probe the underbelly of a slug, and see how easily you find it." Instead of bread—bullets! Instead of obedience—bone-rattling fear! "I swear it works. I swear by all Red coffins."

"Sure. Sure. Why not?"

"So. Cast away your past of darkness! March with us into the dawn! Help give history a push! Bring on the New World Order!"

"Yes, comrade. Sure. Right. Let's!" the dim-wit muttered, overwhelmed, and shuddered in the wind.

"Well, think it over. Will you?" Dominik stared at him with narrowed eyes. "Don't say you weren't asked. Come join our crowd. Just ask for Nestor, will you? A voice to chew at sinews. Two eyes to chill the blood."

# Chapter 46

His full name was Nestor Machno. He was the king of thugs, the potentate of hooligans. His eyes had the glitter of spite. Where he slept, the demons huddled, grinning. Where he walked, the earth commenced to groan.

He spared neither infant nor saint.

Since he plundered, raped and killed, many years have come and gone. The groans of the tortured have long disappeared; not even the echoes remain. But in the patchwork of most anybody's memory who lived within his thoroughfare, he was the Antichrist who roamed the wastes of Russia, who asked: "What is there to stop me now?"

The Fiend had the run of the land. Wherever he appeared, the cockerel jumped to the roofs and gnawed away the rafters built centuries before. He put the match to every foreign manor house his filthy hands could seize. He hammered down the strongest doors, ripped open every down comforter. He rifled through cellars and attics. He tortured, raped and killed.

No exception was made. No mercy was shown.

And when he fixed his blood-shot eye on Dominik and asked one wind-blown morning: "Just where, exactly, is this place called Apanlee?" the fate of Apanlee was sealed.

Dominik took pride in his precarious footing with this thug, whose name had leaped to notoriety—who shot the priest, who burned his church, and made the rich scrub the peasants' floors. He had come upon him when the battle front was torn to ribbons, the country ripped to shreds.

"I do not beat about the bush," Machno had bragged, and something within Dominik had snapped. He knew he need fear nothing. His new mentor's name spelled protection.

By then, Machno had led his rag-tag army many times across the plains of the Ukraine—looting armories, setting fire to grain, leading his band of dishevelled marauders, searching for places where riches were still to be found.

The spark of mutiny within Natasha's son roared into open thrill. "Your army suits me fine," said Dominik, and joined Machno's black flag.

What fun to see the Germans helpless prey within the claw and fang of Russia! A hoodlum's joy, the German villages—as vulnerable as birds on naked branches. You could rob them and rob them, and still there was enough.

He roared, as others did: "Poetic justice, Comrade, no?"

To see the hated foreigners evicted from their homes with clubs was sweet revenge for Dominik. A country in the throes of civil war—and foreigners still rolling out *vareniki* and dipping zwieback in their coffee?

"What's mine is mine," he roared. "What's theirs is mine as well."

It's now or never," said Machno. "It might as well be now."

Whole armies were sent to arrest him—in vain. He knew no loyalty to anyone, and felt no obligation. His fame spread like fire through sheaves.

Let Wrangel take away his trains; let Trotskys men explode his bridges! An easy thing, a laugh, to catch a fool and smash his

fingers on an anvil and thereby learn the enemy's secrets!

Machno was profitable company for Dominik, the dungeons having maddened him sufficiently. The veins in his forehead threatened to burst as he remembered all the full-size portraits of the imperial family that framed the halls of Apanlee.

He'd found his niche. He saw his goal. The Revolution, a satanic mill, designed to pulverize the past? He hooted his approval.

As brother strife fanned out and civil war set manors blazing, to join the avalanche of willing demons in search of loot and spoils seemed natural.

He hated them, the foreigners. On the sweat of the serfs they had fattened themselves. A Revolution was a thing of pain and blood and tears. Let them beware: foul were the times. Into the flames flew every tsarist document and ukase. Down came the hated double eagles.

"Wrest the booty from their hands!"

"Suck the marrow from their bones."

"Loot their pantries."

"Rape their women."

"Triple-check their pockets—and then shoot them in a ditch."

He heard the voices of his New World Order comrades and pushed open the door to their lair with the tip of his boot. There they were, all proletarian heroes, and he was one of them; he felt at home with them; they were his flesh and sinew.

They greeted him with bawdy songs and shouts. "Hey, Dominik! Say, Dominik! What's there to stop you now?"

"That's right. Move over, you. What's there to stop me now?"

He stripped the sheepskin from his shoulders and found himself a place to peel his feet out of the shreds of newspapers he had stuffed deep into his boots to keep his toes from freezing. He turned them upside down and poured out a trickle of mud.

"Say! Hand me your machorka pouch."

"What's that? A German Bible?"

"No finer paper anywhere," the bandit said, and rolled himself a smoke.

God's dictum: puff! and it was gone.

A neat little bullet: a life was no more.

A match: a mansion turned to ashes.

Just aim a cannon at a church—and it became a chicken coop!

Just board a train and travel up and down the countryside of Russia—for free!

Feeling warm and cozy to the core, he stretched his filthy toes and listened to the gossip of his comrades who toasted one another gleefully:

"—you old pig's bladder—"

"—were you born on a manure heap—?"

"—your mother, the old carrion. The ugly, trashy cat—"

Nothing was sacred, no curses off limits. They topped each other's blasphemies: "You rotten horse thief, here you are, and only yesterday, without a single kopeck of your own—"

"Bottoms up! Bottoms up! And freedom to the masses!"

Ah! Bottoms up! Could there be sweeter words?

"What's next?" said Dominik. He was sated with blood, like a tick.

They had already shot the smart and diligent and hanged the rich and massacred the prayerful. The stars, bells, crowns, crosses, eagles—gone! The hapless bureaucrats of yesterday—felled by the bayonet. The power lines were cut, by then; the country all but paralyzed. With his own hands, he'd ransacked many an estate, thrown open every drawer, and thrown the contents about on the floor. And yet there was a gnawing hunger, deep down within, a need that no words could convey.

There was still Apanlee.

He watched them thoughtfully, his tried and tested comrades, munching on sunflower seeds. At his side, he held his bayonet, fingering it now and then. Between his legs he held a dog, and fed it table scraps.

"We're waiting, Dominik."

With one long stroke, he raked the Bible closer. He opened it. He took a pencil stub and bore down hard. "See this fat cross? See these two roads? That's Apanlee. That's where you find this place called Apanlee. They have well-bolted doors. But here's a little side gate the favorite servants use—"

He spit in a long arch. The bandits cheered and hooted. Give us a mansion—like a wolf pack we come! With a demon howl we come.

"—here's where you cut the power lines."

They stamped their feet to show approval. "Where's a stone? We need one to sharpen our knives."

The liquor helped some; no doubt about it. It dilated his pupils. It turned his face as deep and dark as ink.

"Here! Bottoms up! Say! Bottoms up!"

Of late, he was monstrously drunk more often than not, and never entirely sober. How else could he have borne the knowledge that, as judging from his comrades' hoots, in yet another week, a massive grave would cover all—the guilty and the innocent? He spoke in a faint slur.

"See where my thumb is? See where I point my finger? Here's how the buildings are laid out. I do not know who told you. It surely wasn't me—"

The fire water poured its warmth into his veins and clarity into his words. Every drop of blood in Dominik's unwashed body thrilled to the thought of Apanlee.

"How do you know? It it true you were born at Apanlee?" asked one of them, while blowing smoke through blue-veined nostrils.

"Not quite," said Dominik. "I wasn't born at Apanlee."

"Ha! So you say!"

"I was born in a shed," Dominik said coldly. "I was naked. I was cold. I was put into a wooden trough my father's wife gave my mother." He felt remote now, but content. He spoke slowly through tobacco fumes. "My father's wife said to my mother: 'There is a worm in every windfall apple.' And my mother? My mother? She said to the child she had borne: 'You! You! Where

are your freckles? Huh?'"

Through a thick haze, he saw Natasha, swaddling them and cuddling them and cooing to them softly—the twins, her freckled favorites, usurping all her love. He added with a little hiccup:

"If they were snug—why, she was happy. When she was there, at Apanlee, she was at home with everything." He saw his mother clearly. Her reign in her beloved nursery had widened the pond of her life to a lake. He added: "My heart turned as hard as a nut."

The muffled conversation ceased. The hoodlums listened silently.

"A peasant dipped his finger in his vodka and let me suck on it. That was the only warmth I knew. That peasant worked at Apanlee. He beat my mother. Often. He sued to beat me, too. He beat us both until we started spitting blood—"

He took a deep breath, and his eyes turned to milk.

"They thought that I was blind," said Dominik. "But I saw all. They thought that I was deaf. But I heard everything. My eyes and ears were everywhere. Apanlee? What's Apanlee? Its shadow fell across my cradle—"

The memories of past iniquities now drove the glitter to his pupils. He stared into the faces of his comrades who had helped to bring the Revolution, and in his demented soul he knew: "The centuries will long remember how I helped strangle Apanlee."

He said:

"Watch me. I spit on Apanlee. I'll put the torch to Apanlee. I'll thaw out my toes in its ashes—"

Natasha had just about shouldered her way through the feverish days, since the measles had come with the fogs. She knew Marleen was useless; the midwife never left her elbow.

"You go to bed now, hear?" Natasha gave Marleen a nudge. "And you, with your varicose veins!"

That night, Marleen did not argue. She longed for sleep; she was not feeling well, and let Natasha have the upper hand for

once.

"All right. All right," she said. Tomorrow was tomorrow.

The many children she had borne throughout the years had weakened her; she did not pick up the implied insult that this would be her last—she might tomorrow, surely, belittle and lambast Natasha. So let Natasha feel triumphant; bed rest was all Marleen wanted, now that confinement was at hand.

"Be sure to sponge them all," she said mechanically, and helped Natasha haul the giant zinc tub from the basement, before she went upstairs to hug her blanket tight about her and try to catch some sleep. "And help them say their prayers."

She knew she need not tell Natasha what to do, and did so only out of habit. She was content and grateful to know Natasha was there, back in the nursery, to lend a hand to Dorothy and lighten the burden of too many voices that whimpered for their nightly lullabys or begged to be put on the potty. Natasha was reliable. Natasha brought to every task extraordinary energy—still scrubbing diapers, wiping little fingerprints off walls and sills, inspecting footsoles, ears and fingernails, snug in her toasty nursery when the hard frosts arrived and didn't go away.

So on this evening.

Outside, the wind blew hard; the night was ink; the trees stood stiff; but in the nursery, the embers glowed as always.

Natasha was just about finished, firmly in charge of the orbit she knew. She supervised the quarantine; she needed every bed.

She had curtly evicted the twins who slept in the straw of her hut, to make room for additional neighborhood children, all covered with spots, head to toe.

Her nursery was packed that night. With Dorothy to lend a hand, she swaddled, scolded, washed and diapered each and every one of them until they shone like apples. She did a final check from bed to bed; with that, her evening ritual was done. She dunked the last one in the suds whose place was second at a row of nine, as counted from the bottom. Her name was Mimi, five years old. She was Natasha's cherished child that night, because

her fever was cresting, and next in line was Jonathan, a little older than the girl, who had already learned to count, this long before a mortal taught him anything; he was that smart and clever. He'd just been showing off a brand new tooth when he, too, caught the splotches.

"Come, Jonny. Sit here in my lap. Teach me to count to ten," coaxed Dorothy, his grandmother, still lovely to look at. She, too, smiled, lingeringly—smiled at her much-beloved grandson, a smile that held the warmth of many tiny suns.

"That one is truly special, Dorothy," Natasha said, intent to please.

"Yes, isn't he?" By all accounts, here was a little fellow so developed mentally that, as per Uncle Benny, beaming, to count past twenty was a snap. The secrets of addition and subtraction would be next.

"He is amazing, Dorothy."

No disagreement there. This youngster still was much too young for school, but he already knew his ABCs, and when he stubbed his toe, he was too proud to run and seek for solace on Natasha's spongy bosom—as did most everybody else, adept at using any old excuse to be her valentine.

*"Eins. Zwei. Drei. Vier. . ."* said Jonathan.

*"Fuenf. Sechs,"* Natasha finished, proud of her German skills. She relished the boy's yawn. "Sleep tight now, Jonny. Do. You can teach me tomorrow."

She looked around. The truth be told, and why pretend? she loved them all, and dearly. She treasured every one of them. She loved them like her own. Marleen did not know this—and had she known, she would have only snorted with contempt and clattered with her dishes!—but did she, old Natasha, need a bombasting Revolution to get her share of kisses?

Such was Natasha's world.

# Chapter 47

Natasha, finished with her chores, next went into the shed to turn the hay. She wanted to sit down with Hein a bit and talk, should he decide to check the horses for the night.

She waited for him patiently. That's when she heard the gallop of the horses.

She threw the pitch fork in an arch. "Machno!" she screamed. "Machnooo!"

She thought her lungs would explode. For herself, she had no fear. She knew that they came for the loot.

"Machnooo!"

She was old and a martyr already: what did she own of worth, what had she ever owned? Her dented samovar? The mare that Hein had let her have—a beast barely able to stand? Ten scraggly, meager chickens? A saucer with some oil? A ragged piece of cotton to which to put a match?

No, she stood blameless—that she knew. Nothing had she ever done to bring dishonor to the Revolution. The tsars? What were the tsars to her? If they were gone—why, they were gone!

She panted in her terror. Tsars or no tsars, they mattered not to old Natasha; what mattered were the folks of Apanlee, whom she had served in loyalty. Her own life had never been of value—if it was lost, so what?

But Susie! Katie! Rosie!

Who else? Her mind went blank, and then recovered: Paulie! Jonny! Rosalie!

She didn't even count the twins, who had long legs to run. But Mimi! Jonathan! All fever-spotted! Upstairs!

*"Bozhe moi!"* she whimpered, now stumbling through Marleen's bare flower beds. "Run! Hide! Machno! Machnooo!"

The truth at last! It came to her in flashes. All that was Hein's, was hers, vicariously—she never grasped until this very minute that this was so, but now she knew! She knew! She knew, as she had never known before, that she loved Hein's blond, blue-eyed brood as if they were her own. His children were her children, and never mind who gave them birth! She knew!

She ran through the orchards, crept through the thickets, felt her way along the wall and thus reached the back of the grain shed. A dog took off howling; a window on the second floor flew shut. A small hand reached for her; small fingers, hot with fever. She cuffed and kicked it right into the night and deep into the bushes.

She recognized Hein's voice; she felt his hands; he reached for her; she shook him off as well, and headed right into the light that shone from one small window. Not for a moment did she hesitate—she knew where her loyalties lay. Her mind careened. Her voice was no longer her own.

"Hide! Hide!" she screamed. "Machno! Machnooooo!"

A horse whinnied somewhere, sputtering mud. She fell and, spitting earth and gravel, she scrambled to her feet. "Hide out!" she shrieked. "They're coming! *Bozhe moi!* They're here!"

Her shouts swept a small shadow deep into the bushes. She thought, a simple woman: "As death comes, even children cower." There was a roar within her head, but still she strained to hear. Her mind was reeling, boiling, overflowing, yet it was cold as

the black ice she felt beneath her soles.

"Machno!" she screamed again. "Run! Hide! Machnooo!"

Would they pass by? They had passed by before.

She waited, paralyzed. She heard the horses, galloping, then slowing to a nervous, prancing trot, right at the gates of Apanlee, next to the lilac bushes.

Marleen heard them as well, but was too thick, by then, with her belated budding life to run. Still drugged with sleep, she stumbled to the shed to quiet the odd commotion, her mind devoid of reason.

A rifle butt crashed hard against a door. The blast of rifle fire tore through the silence and made the snow fall from the trees. Marleen heard the shot, and then another and another and sat, doubled over, each time guessing whose life it might be.

"Machno!"

"Machno!"

"Machnoooo!"

Another shot rang out, and Dorothy, still in the nursery upstairs, cut off from escape, hid her small face in her starched, cross-stitched apron and started praying softly.

"Oh, Uncle Benny! Uncle Benny!" whispered Dorothy. In all his life, his spider legs had never even twitched without a major effort. No way he could have run.

He didn't even try.

The noise woke up a small, forgotten child. Barefoot and blinking, it stood at the top of the stairs, dragging a blanket, thumb in its mouth. A bandit hit it once, full force—and it fell over, dead. Obligingly, another ran his bayonet into the soft and unresisting body to make sure.

Still in a fog of vodka and of fury, the two careened into the kitchen. There they found several measles-covered cousins, in utter terror, huddled together near the door.

"There! There! Another one! Vipers! Viper brood all!"

It was a massacre—no other name is just. The hoodlums

came to kill, and that is what they did. All night long, they killed and robbed and raped and plundered, and when they left, they left behind them several children's heads in saucers on the sill of Marleen's well-scrubbed nursery.

That's part of history. Look at it and find words. And when it happened, where was God? And when the Hooked Cross arrived—a generation later—to stop the Antichrist, small wonder that, at Apanlee, it found its perfect mooring?

Hein was the first to die that night, and brutally.

A bandit pulled him from the hay; three others slid out of the bushes. The four of them kept hooting with their mirth as they pulled down his trousers. They made him run barefoot in circles, first in his granary, across the scattered grain, and then outside, while shooting volleys at his loins until the snow was red. They beat him until they were tired. They egged each other on: "Step on his kulak corns."

Natasha watched it all, too petrified to move. She crouched behind a bush. When Hein went down at last, they knelt on him and slashed his belly open, then filled it with the grain his great-grandfather, Peet, had traded from the Tartars.

"Exploiter! Traitor! Kulak swine!"

For quite a while, they took turns pulling on his mustache, and then they tired of that, too—so, with a slash, they cut it off, a bloody piece of hair and skin, and flung it in the air and laughed uproariously. Hein's kaiser mustache caught itself within the tangle of the dry acacia trees, and there it hung, all winter long, and no one gave a hoot.

And Uncle Benny. He died, too.

He died while shielding Dorothy who lay across the zinc tub, spread-eagled, fiercer than a crab. The zinc tub heaved as though it were a living thing, for underneath that tub lay Jonathan and Mimi. With all her might, she held that zinc tub down.

From the corner of her eye, she saw a hoodlum swing the invalid around and sink his knees into his back, and when her husband tried to ward him off as one might fight a maddened

dog, a clenched fist landed in his face. That's when she screamed, for she was not yet dead; she saw—she saw the thug jump up and sit astride the cripple's hunchback, reeking of sheepskin and garlic, and Uncle Benny, panting feebly, went crashing to the floor.

That's how the half-Jew died at Apanlee.

He died, an old and fragile man, entitled to his dignity, clubbed into bloody pulp as one might club a rattler. He did not have a single enemy. Not ever had he harmed a beetle.

"Even your shadow is an offense!" moaned Uncle-Benny feebly to the revolutionary thug, and those were his last words.

"Ha! *Donnerwetter! Donnerwetter!*"

The bandit seized the first thing within reach—a prayer book with heavy silver clasps and sturdy wooden cover. It had been brought from the Vistula Plains. The scoundrel held it in his hands and cursed. A bunch of stupid lies! An old wives' fairy tale! Now, what a fine torpedo!

He swung it wide, let fly. It hit Dorothy smack in the scented temple.

Her valor came from nowhere. She struggled wind into her lungs and wrapped both arms and legs around the tub while terror dug its teeth into her spine and started tossing her about as if she were a bird within the claws of a ferocious cat. She shuddered briefly, while she hugged the zinc tub to herself—a small, obliging woman whose hair was white, whose heart was throbbing still, for what was underneath that basin, now convulsing, was her dead daughter's son. She stretched herself across that basin with all the strength at her command, and there she stayed. A knot.

And thus died Dorothy— the one with pale and tapered fingers, adept at fancy needlework, the one who took the smallest ailment to the doctors. The tub beneath her heaved and rocked as if it were a beetle, but she clutched onto it and would not yield—not to the kicks aimed at her spine, not to the raining rifle butts, not to the threshing flail that whistled down on her repeatedly and bloodied her hair a bright red.

"Please don't," prayed Dorothy, by then a senseless woman.

Why would he count the blows? Why not be quiet?

Three. Four.

She prayed a senseless prayer that faded out before it reached the ceiling.

". . . Five. Six."

A life is short. A death takes an eternity. Beneath her knuckled fists, a small voice kept on counting as he was taught to count.

". . . Fifteen. Sixteen."

Pause.

"Seventeen."

"Have mercy!" she moaned, and then, in higher pitch: "It is you! Let the devil be loose—!" It was a high and choking scream that sent the hoodlum spinning.

"It's me," he said. "It's Dominik." His hands groped for the weaver's shuttle. He kicked it over with his foot. He struck as a man strikes, when blinded by hate. A chandelier splintered. Something else came crashing to the floor. That was the last reverberating sound the Lord would allow Dorothy. She took it in. She knew, exactly, what it was—one of her husband's prized possessions, a stately sculpture and a gift, carved from a solid block of granite, bearing a small, bronze angel at its tip. One hand held the revered cross, the other hand pointed to heaven.

"For all eternity," the gold inscription said.

"For all eternity? Ha!"

A hoodlum ran his bayonet right through the clock, a whirl of wheels and chains and metal. "Eighteen," whispered the child underneath, but Dorothy, we must assume, lest we go mad, now heard the chimes of heaven.

". . . Nineteen. Twenty." Thus counted Jonathan, six years of age, as he had taught himself to count.

The counting drove the hiccups onto his playmate's swollen tongue. "Quiet, Mimi! Mimi, hush!" He put a hand across her face and tried to silence her. They battled with each other in the small space the tub allowed. The boy won out; he forced the girl child down. She had a brand new tooth. She bit him hard, but still he held her down. Against his cheek, he felt her ragged

breath. It slackened, and then stopped.

Upstairs, somebody hurled an object through the window.

"Death! Death to all the parasites!"

"And fire! Fire! Fire! To the mills!"

Behold that silver candlestick. Look at that fancy lamp. Smash it into a thousand pieces. That bench? Those portraits of the hated monarchs? For all eternity? Here's how!

Thus silenced Dominik the half-breed, the things he hated most: their scrupulous lifestyle, their slow and strong tenacity, their maddening tongues, their precious racist God.

Now for the aftermath.

The night was clear and quiet. The moon was pale. The stars were gone. The wind kept whistling softly.

A boy's small shadow slid along the stairs, then felt its way along the trampled boysenberry rows. It stood on tiptoes, briefly, to unlock the heavy gate. The clouds sat low. The snow lay still and deep. The windows of the darkened south wing rattled.

The child stared at a pet. The pet stared back unblinking, a bayonet embedded in its spine.

A peasant, passing by, oblivious, stopped by the road to urinate. He did not see the shadow.

*"Pascholl!"* he said, while hitching up his trousers. He slapped the horse and clicked his tongue, but not before the little shadow climbed atop his cart and crouched to make himself as small as possible.

The muzhik never knew he had a stowaway.

The wheels squeaked away. The silence returned. In a minute, the shaky contraption was gone.

When fine, pale colors tinted the sky, Natasha crept out of the bushes.

The yard lay empty and trampled. A chicken lay, neatly beheaded, smack on the steps of Apanlee, and next to it lay Hannele, eight years of age, a neighbor child, fourth in line as counted from the cradle, beheaded just as neatly.

A little to the left lay Rosalie, Hein's middle child, stabbed more than twenty times.

Natasha doubled over. Natasha muttered in High German: "Have mercy, Lord! Have mercy! Have mercy on us all."

Hein's body lay beside a pile of manure. Beside him, Natasha saw the twins, wordless and rocking. Alive. As she slunk by those two, she cringed as though she were a cur, but did not say a word.

She crept inside. Manhandled and then dropped, all kinds of household items lay strewn across the room. By the still-smoking oven slumped a body, next to the toppled samovar. She knelt to turn it over. She took her time with him. "You? Who would rather read than eat? The skies are weeping, Uncle Benny."

Natasha longed to take his hands, to run her fingertips across the violence, but then she noticed that he had no hands; someone had chopped them off and nailed them to the door.

She searched throughout the house to look for Jonathan. The angry bayonets had slashed and sliced the feather beds. Drawers had been yanked open, their contents strewn about. The little boy was gone.

"My pet?" she called. "My love? Don't hide yourself and cause my heart to stop! Where are you, Jonathan?"

Natasha crept into the barn. The cattle, needing to be watered, bellowed loudly.

"Oh, *bozhe moi*!" Natasha wept, collapsing on some pieces of charred lumber. Deep wails rose from her throat. "You, Mimi? Is it you?" she said at last, and pulled the mute child close. "My little baby girl? Alive?"

A little to her left lay something in the straw.

"Marleen," Natasha begged. "Wake up, Marleen. Now! This very minute I want you to wake up." She reached for her. "Here! Can you walk? Hold onto me and try."

Marleen still seemed to breathe, but shallowly, her face an empty slate. Natasha's eyes grew wide, then frosted as though glazed.

She was a peasant, filled with an earthy knowledge; she bent

and bit the cord. She scooped the newborn up and wrapped it in her apron.

She said inaudibly: "I'll swaddle you. I'll cuddle you. I'll put you on the potty."

She said to the comatose woman: "Here is the truth, so help me God. He came because he couldn't stay away." She spoke past a lump in her throat. "He's dead," she said. "Now it's just you and me. From this day on, it's you and me, Marleen."

Thus slid away the past—the hurts of youth, the petty jealousies. The bloody kernels, filling up the cavity where Hein's large, lusty heart had beaten for them both, had evened up a score. She knew that now, as in a fog—it was a strangely soothing thought. She knew Hein would have been a stranger to this unity she felt, this utter oneness with Marleen. Hein was a man, a German, and, besides—for all his charm!—he was a lout who used and then discarded.

Not she. She knew where value lay.

He would not possibly have understood the singularity of loss that brought rebirth. Renewal. Natasha's eyes filled to the brim. She said again: "It's you and me, Marleen."

A stranger he had been, this stately and aloof philanderer whom she had loved for many years, beginning in the fullness of her youth. Now Hein was gone. And she was old. A circle had been closed.

She said to his last legacy: "I'll hum to you. I'll kiss your teeny toes."

She sat in stolid silence, the newborn curled up in her apron. She sat there for the longest time, not thinking anything, not given to unnecessary musings. But then she roused herself. Her eyes fell on the wheelbarrow. She heaved and pushed and pulled, and in the end, she had Marleen—delirious with childbed fever, but fitting snugly in between two boards. All right, now! Here we go!

That cold and bloody morning Natasha wheeled her rival, comatose and manure-coated, right back into the halls of Apanlee.

# Chapter 48

Spin backwards a few years. The Lord's sun shone brightly on Kansas—nothing but azure skies spanning a daisy-strewn earth!

The paralyzed streams came to life. The birds built their nests among glistening leaves. The baby cradles filled; the midwife was at hand. Model T's came down in price. Rotarians slapped each other on the shoulders.

Jan beat his previous record—three years in a row, he reaped fabulous crops. He was the town's most trusted leader. All honor went to him.

Josie was wild for that typewriter, truly. Whereas her husband prospered more and more, a model citizen, she still kept secret journals. She still wrote cryptic letters.

Her pad was always in her lap, her pencil always poised. She kept on clipping articles for Uncle Benny to have them at her fingertips the moment mail to Russia was restored. She kept them in a shoebox.

She read the nights away, and often slept all day. For years,

she had poured all her energies into the final push to get the female vote, which no one thought would pass.

Her blue eyes flashed with challenge.

"This club today—that club tomorrow," insisted Josie nastily and plunged her nose into another novel. She read one book that had five hundred pages.

When Lizzy begged: "Explain yourself. Explain the whys and hows—" Josie preened herself before her looking glass and did not have an answer.

Her gaiety was mocking, and it hurt. She vexed her soul with this and that, and was fond of peculiar notions. Midstream, the tone of her arguments hardened. An alien in Mennotown, she never found her niche. Between Josie and the clan, there yawned an unbridgeable chasm.

She wore her skirts two inches off the ground and kept cavorting with the Finkelsteins. The source of all of Josie's mischief and maneuvers was her astounding intellect. The Articles of Faith that Dewey proffered as an antidote brought no relief to Josie. She battered and destroyed.

And yet, there was a void.

The neighbors watched her standing by the window—yearning, hoping, saddening—but what it was she grieved was a deep mystery to them.

She often spoke of matters philosphical. She claimed she longed to set right what was wrong. She pined for an ass' sharp jawbone, like Samson wielded on the Philistines.

Once Little Melly spied a piece of carbon paper, held it up against the light, and drew her own conclusion. "The Chosen ones again," she said, and relished several shudders.

"Gold! Gold!" the anxious townsfolk said.

It wasn't deeply rooted, nor was it a controlling ideology. It was just there. It was an understanding.

So let the Hebrews claim the lofty banner in hard-hit, bleeding Russia was universal betterment. The driving force, they knew as members of a creed that had a German history to fall back on—a history of hard work, diligence, self-discipline, and

thrift—was money.

If you had ears to hear and eyes to see, the city fathers told themselves, you knew, behind the social unrest everywhere around the globe—and that included Russia—were still the sidelocks and yarmulkes.

"Please, lovey. Just don't you encourage these people—" begged Lizzy, but Josephine, ignoring her, had tea with them, right on the sidewalk, out in the open.

"There's a New Order waiting in the wings. The world will be our garden."

That's what she said. With Josie, all was drama. There was a slant in Josie's eyes that said: "Just wait and see. One step at the time. One day at a time. You haven't seen anything yet." Excitement fueled her embers.

"I think," cried Josie, shrill as the overseer's whistle, "Jews are the smartest, most progressive people in the world."

An Elder let fly a guffawing laugh: "Oh, yeah? Yeah? How come, then, they missed the Messiah?"

That made but little difference, as far as Josie was concerned. Steeped in rebellion, she throbbed with impatience, mad for any action, contemptuous of chapter and verse. The female vote was within reach—and she at center stage!

Jan never tired of watching her. He cherished Josephine. But, on the other hand, he also cherished harmony. He treasured peace of mind. He valued family. His eyes were bright with pain.

The day came when Jan cleared his throat and said to Doctorjay: "I came to ask for help."

At once, the healer sat back, lit his pipe, and smiled attentively.

"She craves too much excitement," Jan began. He would have been much rather in the fields than within range of the old Lutheran's cunning wink. "What's happening in Russia looks like deliverance to her."

"Harrumph!" said Doctorjay, restrained. "Your wife's the talk of Wichita. As odd as a blustery Christmas."

"Her heart warms to most any ideology that's new."

Doctorjay spoke from instinct, seasoned by a lifetime of experience. He nudged his friend along: "There is a failproof answer. Put yet another baby in the cradle."

That would have been nature's solution. Both Noralee and Lizzy said as much. They pointed out the neighbors gave long stares.

"I don't think so," said Jan, unwilling to confirm the rumor.

"But how can you be sure?"

"Not even God," said Jan, his temples white by then, "can alter last year's harvest."

The village healer stroked his stubbled chin. He flashed the bright sunshine a lopsided grin. "It only takes a couple and a bed."

"Yes. Health permitting, health permitting," said Jan with a small laugh. He trusted Doctorjay as though he were his father. "Discounting that, is there a remedy?"

"Don't give me your excuses. Just take my old gal, Noralee, and me. Almost four decades, son! And look at us! Each hoping to outlast the other! She's healthier and plumper than ever. That's surely my good fortune—"

He briefly lost himself in happy reveries. His earthy marriage to the deacon's widow still yielded joy and comfort. She hugged him and kissed him in obvious delight when he returned from Wichita, unharmed.

"Don't you forget it, Jan. You run the show. You are her husband. A female's point of view is not that hard to understand—"

"To understand a woman such as Josie," Jan told his lifelong friend, "a man needs second sight."

But Doctorjay had good advice to spare. "Take it from me. There's trouble brewing. Trouble, son. Real trouble. And I mean trouble with a T writ large. Watching Josie is like watching Lizzy's milk pots coming slowly to a boil. That one has fire in her belly. Fire, lad! She's got to be contained. You're her husband, aren't you? You've got to calm her down."

For weeks, the healer plowed his well-scored groove, determined and precise.

"She still has a waist as slim as a wasp's. Is that not a temptation? What do you say? Why not give it a try?"

"I know. She's beautiful."

Jan still loved Josie as the apple of his eye, and Doctorjay was not yet willing to give up. With the help of ten fingers he helped Jan along:

"Wasn't she sixteen when you and she married?"

Jan lit a pipe with work-gnarled fingers. "Yes, she was just a little girl."

"She can't be more than forty-two."

"I do not know her age."

"What? Why not? Don't tell me it's impossible. Why, just the other day, your mother saw her feasting on a plate of dumplings, and all her hopes soared to the sky—"

Jan said with an uneasy laugh: "Let's call it a day."

But Doctorjay was rolling downhill now. "She's still remarkably preserved."

He left in highest spirits to share his hopes with Noralee who kept her fingers crossed. "

She's still remarkably preserved," said Noralee to several friends, to get full use from that fine phrase.

All females in the neighborhood agreed: a pregnancy would put a speedy end to short hems and rolled stockings.

But Josie kept on saying "no" when prodded for specifics. "There is no way," said Josie, fighting back as best she could to even the indignity. And each and every book that came her way, she read.

Doctorjay liked Josie well enough and tried to see her side. She was as fond of Wichita as he, where every taxi driver was his friend. He had been in her camp for many years—and she in his, no matter what the gossip. But this was a couple in conflict, and both of them his friends.

Both shoes were pinching him. He loved Jan dearly, too. His

heart thumped with his love for Jan, who had done more than his fair share by buying bonds and yet more bonds to push the foreign war to victory. Here was the end result: Doctorjay could not hold two opposing points of view—not without getting dizzy.

"This so-called female freedom business," he therefore counseled Josephine next time he crossed her path, "if I were you, I wouldn't take too far—"

At once, she was on guard. "What do you mean by that?"

"As I just said, if I were you—"

"You aren't," she snapped, curtly, and turned her back on Doctorjay. She said little, but did as she pleased.

Doctorjay, however, was not that easily put off. He started stalking her activities. He knew that almost everyone in Mennotown agreed with Dewey Epp—this business with the suffragettes was an affront to any male, and had to end somehow.

That's how things stood when word came from the wilds of Russia: the tsars had been dethroned.

A tremor went the length of Mennotown. All paled with rage and wrath. The culprits were well known. For decades, they had flung their bombs against the Romanovs. And here was the result!

You did not have to say their names. A baby in the cradle knew their guilt. By their own signatures, they gave themselves away. They snared, and they deceived. Most shared that attitude.

Not a few oldsters still remembered clearly how those who called themselves the Chosen had feuded with the tsars, who tried to weed them out in pogrom after pogrom. The Cossacks came charging; the rascals hid themselves in cellars, under beds, in closets, and in attics, but still, the Cossacks pulled them out and meted out what they deserved by bloodying their heads.

Now this?

"Dreadful news! Dreadful news!" yelped Doctorjay, gunning his flivver, breaking every speed law in the county—and he a fellow with no reason to distrust the banner of equality!—"the

tsars—all gone! The Cossacks—gone! The Winter Palace—gone!"

It was a nasty jolt. What would be next?

"The female vote will destroy everything," concluded Dewey angrily, who needed no survey to tell him the shape of the future. Would he, a healthy male and the dispatcher of the Lord, hold still while watching Kansas females riding roughshod over both the spirit and the letter of the law?

"Just ask yourself," snarled Dewey Epp while waiting on himself—since Josie didn't seem to notice that his coffee cup was empty—"who benefits by toppling governments?"

All six of Josie's daughters paled beneath their freckles. The Elder was no weathercock. He was no coward when it came to his convictions. He spit it out. "The cunning of the serpents is well known."

Noralee stared at the wall, out the window, up at the ceiling, and down at the floor. Little Melly started squirming in her seat. Daisy's stocking grew longer and longer. And even Lizzy muttered wretchedly: "Sure. Sure. Today. Who knows about tomorrow?"

"In our days," chimed in Noralee, as ever practical, "the tsar's dragoons would have arrived and bloodied a few noses—"

She relished memories. She still remembered the imperial eagles—their outspread wings, their haughty beaks, the Cossacks with their uniform of blue and red and gold. She carried gaudy memories of lavish life designed for kings and courtiers. Her glance fastened firmly on Josie's.

But Josie was Josie—she just squared her chin. She rolled words on her tongue as though she were running for office. She knew precisely where to park her loyalties.

"The Russian people are the ones who work the land. No wonder they insist on putting their own profit in their pockets."

Doctorjay next took the issue by the forelock, so to speak.

"We know who engineered the Revolution, Josephine. If nothing else, that much we know. The tsars tried to tear them out

by the roots—"

"What do they want? Why is enough never enough?" wailed Lizzy, desperate.

"What do they want?" cried Josie, furious. "Equality. They want equality. Equality for all. That's what they want. Equality. Why not? The Russian people are entitled to equality. Like everybody else."

Lizzy begged when she had wind again: "Let's wait for detail. Let's not panic." If it was serious business over there, at Apanlee, she knew she could depend on Uncle Benny to give her the straight facts.

Yet all the while, her knees and elbows locked with fear. Something was odd at Apanlee—but what? Daisy whimpered quietly to herself. Little Melly kept sipping her tea from the rim.

"Democracy? Don't make us laugh. That doesn't work in Russia," said Dewey.

But Josie's ears were closed. She was running the liberal fever full tilt; she was blazing with anger and fury; she kept tossing her head like a horse.

"If we're so democratic around here," cried Josephine, "how come we have no woman preachers? How come there's no woman governor? No woman senator? No woman president?"

All stared at her, aghast.

"Don't let me interrupt you in your thoughts—" said Josephine, and lit a cigarette, shaking. By then, she had taken up smoking.

Jan told her then and there: "Enough already, Josephine. I think you'd better put a padlock on your tongue—"

All heads went up. All eyes turned into searchlights. Was this the long-anticipated turn of tide?

"Had I been born a boy, you would not speak to me like that," said Josie after a long pause.

Exhaling. Falling back.

Jan minced no words. "Well, you were not. Just do yourself a favor. Calm yourself. Just calm yourself."

It was unusual to see Jan that upset. He hardly ever chastised

Josie. In fact, so much in love was he—this after all these years!—that barely had he said those words, he went and bought his wife a poodle. That's how upset he was.

An unarticulated dread became a sharpened spike that went through every heart in Mennotown. Just what was going on in Russia? The old and trusted order shook and trembled overseas and, at long last, collapsed. Sharp editorials in several east coast publications, which Josie ordered for herself to keep herself informed, applauded heartily.

It was clear the Hebrews had taken an axe to the legs of the Romanoff throne. The result would be thistles and weeds. Some people even claimed religion had collapsed, while others held the lesser view: no, just the Christian holidays.

For weeks on end, the conversation always turned to Josie and her Hebrews. There was no need to point it out: her new friends at the Red Cross, mostly Jewish.

All, since the Middle Ages, money changers. Each one of them, up to his ears in politics. All liberal to the hilt.

To be a Hebrew lover during peace was bad enough; in war, where every sentence counted, that kind of thing was just like wearing knickerbockers. It was too much. It was imperative to wean her from her hazards.

Which now became the plan. The preachers said as much. In Mennotown, you knew that Jews were useful citizens in times of peace. In war, you had to watch. They all knew secrets of trading in grain they wouldn't reveal to outsiders. They had always, it was understood far and wide, a devious, hidden agenda.

Besides, it wasn't easy being German in America. The Donoghues' heckling just never let up. And where did they get their ideas? From the Second Street Wichita Jews!

Although the war had worn down for some time and now the aftermath was here, to be of German origin was still a shameful stain. A Hun was still a Hun. That's what the papers said. They shrieked that, with gallons of ink, tons of paper.

The only counter-weapon was neutrality and silence and keep-

ing all your thoughts and your opinions to yourself.

Most citizens of Mennotown made sure they had a Hebrew pal or two with whom they did their deals, and never mind the curls. You treated them well, and why not? You liked them well enough. You did whatever business came your way, with all your cards out, open on the table.

But you tiptoed around them. Regardless.

You didn't bring them home for dinner, unless you were out of your head. Just as you left your overshoes outside when you had tracked them through the mud, so, too, you left the Jews outside. The slowest dimwit knew that Jews had never liked the tsars. If Jews deposed the tsars, what would be next? Wide skirts in City Hall?

That's how it was in Mennotown where, after forty years of life in a democracy, the good Lord and His German-speaking Russian monarchy were still, if not synonymous, at least on friendly terms.

But not a few of Josie's Jews in Wichita felt an ecstatic admiration for what was happening in Russia. Their battle cry was: "More power to the Soviets! Land to the toiling masses!" She called that sort of thing progressive. She talked things out with them. She shuttled back and forth to Wichita as though she were a weaver's shuttle.

"This Lenin guy," cried Josephine, while eating standing, too high-strung to sit down. "A hero! A real hero!"

"Not so loud! Please! Keep your voice down!" Lizzy begged, who had ample cause to mistrust any suffragette backer.

"You hear me? He will make rest homes out of palaces. He plans enormous scholarships for poets."

Josie followed all political developments with eager energy, thumbing through the picture magazines. Her beak did not snap shut. She started stabbing with her pencil.

"See? Sweeping Russia of the debris of yesterday—that's what it's all about. Planting snapdragons. Freeing peasants of their bondage and freeing women of their slavery—"

Lizzy hardened herself on the spot. "And who'll do the cooking and baking?"

"Why not take turns? What's wrong with that?"

"A man on a sewing machine?"

"Free health care for the elderly. A savings bond for every new-born child! We ought to learn from Russia. Here in America, do we have benefits like that?"

"We live in Kansas, dear. It's different in Kansas. We have our choices here. We're mostly citizens relying on our families—"

"Right. That's my point. We have our choices here. The Russians never had a choice. Now it's their choice. It's Liberty. Fraternity. Equality. That's what it's all about."

"Okay. Okay. I said okay. Just leave me out."

Nobody quarreled with democracy. They had helped to forge equality out of the fissured soil of Kansas. If all the fuss on the old continent pertained to things like justice and equality, they were sure that their struggles would sort themselves out. At least that was their hope.

But Lizzy knew not even Doctorjay could hold his own when Josie started arguing equality. He'd scratch his head. He'd start to waffle dreadfully when Josie started serving up democracy by palming off the rights of the downtrodden.

A genuine American like Doctorjay agreed: less power to elites. More power to plain folks.

But Lizzy also saw the other side and couldn't close her eyes. It was enormously conflicting, this business of equality. The Donoghues already thought they were entitled to a life served on a silver platter, yet thought nothing of snoring a Monday away. Was that equality?

"For every toddler, Lizzy dear, a cup of milk," claimed Josie, looking sly, while battering already sore emotions. "Fresh from the udder, Lizzy! Foaming!"

Lizzy punched several pillows while making a bed for a visiting uncle. "Okay! Okay! I said okay! Just leave me out, I

said!"

Lizzy was nearly blind, by now, and had some trouble hearing, but when her dogs brought in her cows, old Lizzy's heart still sang like a canary.

"The lowliest herdsman, nowadays, can draw a salary that's equal to a judge's salary."

"That's just a rumor. Nothing else."

Regardless of birth. Regardless of gender."

"Hold it. Stop it right there. Don't use that dirty word."

# Chapter 49

The constant wailing of the suffragettes, as Dewey pointed out, for rights they didn't need and wouldn't win, was hard on everyone. The issue loomed large in the papers.

Meanwhile, the Methodists and Unitarians were warring over membership and cutting into Dewey's flock, but that was small potatoes compared to a portentious development: Jan's Josie was up for election. She was running for president of the regional suffragette club. She kept tacking up posters everywhere—even on fences, on barns and on trees.

"I do it as a public service," she argued herself ill. "The female vote will change America. Just wait and see. Just watch and wait and see."

She ran for office brazenly. Her plan to have a hand in politics showed up in telling ways. It was a chore to get her to sit down. She still was eating standing. She had her eye fixed firmly on the Chamber, which was the prelude for the kind of mischief everybody feared: to throw a monkey wrench into the power lunches the town's Rotarians put on.

If Lizzy said beatifically, attempting to distract her: "Looks

like it's going to rain—" Josie would outguess her small maneuver on the spot and counter haughtily: "Don't get your hopes up, Lizzy dear. We're planning a rally tomorrow—"

It was time the deacons laid down the law. They had glued themselves to her heels; consensus stood behind the Elder Dewey like a mountain, solid.

By then, he was near comatose with wrath. He knew she couldn't be budged. Her eyes were beaten gold. She preened herself, oblivious to the heartache that she caused, as if she personally had a hand in Russia's Revolution, and Kansas would be next. All that came out of Russia. Taffeta hat and all, a rooster plume atop, she followed all developments in Russia as outlined in the papers.

"Do something! Do something!" begged Lizzy, who wouldn't let go of the bonesetter's sleeve.

Doctorjay, at his wits' end, racked his brain. A week went by, two weeks, before he found a wedge.

"You're at that age now, Josephine."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"You're triggering female disorders, including melancholia."

"Oh, just be quiet."

"What will be next? Tap dancing? Table tapping?"

"I don't see that I'm doing anybody any harm."

"Harrumph!"

"And I might do myself some good. To have a purpose makes me happy."

It was all clear to her. The long-suppressed, long-suffering peasants had finally cried out and overturned the old, established order. They made a Revolution on the old so as to build the new. She understood that cry. She sympathized with the oppressed. Had she not weaned herself on Uncle Benny's editorials?

She went to meeting after meeting and saw a sea of upraised faces. Here was excitement. Here was progress. It mattered little that the struggle raged on overseas—it was the ideology, the principle that counted. She launched her loyalties in turn.

"I do the things my conscience tells me must be done."

She clenched her fist. She wore a fiery scarf. "Oh, how I wish I could do more!" sighed Josephine. All of Jan's small change went straight into her purse and, not a few guessed angrily, from there into the pockets of the Jews.

She knew, she next confessed to Abigail while swearing her to secrecy, that many Jews of New York City were sending money, blankets, and rolled bandages to help to reinforce the Reds.

"We're rich. They're poor. This is about equality."

"That's what it's all about," said Abigail while standing at her elbow.

"Right. You can't ever do enough to lend a neighborly hand to the poor."

"Some go so far as to donate their wedding rings," suggested Abigail, but Josie shrank from that.

"I cannot bring myself to take the leap," said Josie wretchedly, who knew whereof Abigail spoke. She would not dip into Jan's bank account behind his back and write a hefty draft. She stopped short there, but she came close. She burned to be of aid. She was still powered by her memories of Apanlee and all that she and Uncle Benny had discussed so many times, the ins and outs, in reams of correspondence defining social justice.

"For, after all," said Josephine to Abigail, while glowing like a fireplace newly stoked with firs, "in many ways, this Revolution has to do with Apanlee. I still remember Apanlee. I clearly see the gap."

"That's right. The gap. Between the haves and the have-nots."

"That's what I always say." Josie spoke from personal authority. She still remembered everything. She still remembered being *herrenvolk*, devouring berries by the fistful while Russian peasant children stood and watched.

"Well, then?"

"I'm racking my brains for a simple way out, but all I have is mostly Jan's and Lizzy's money."

"Sure. Doubtfully acquired," said Abigail, whose sons still

sought that missing document that would have transferred title.

"We don't know that," said Josie, reddening.

"But we suspect," said Abigail.

When odd, disjointed stories started trickling into Kansas that Russia's earth was turning red, Josie put on her dark glasses. Not true, said Josephine.

"No doubt," she argued lamely when word came of enormous ethnic suffering, "the country is cleaning the house."

The dream for true equality, she amplified, punching a down comforter with both fists, could never be corrupted—although, admittedly, the government of Russia was now beset by foreign intervention and counter-Revolution.

It was a languid afternoon. Five visitors had come for coffee and were now sitting on the porch.

"That's leadership? You call that leadership?"

"Yes, leadership," insisted Josephine, a fine sheen on her face.

They watched how she painted herself into a corner. Remember her *papa*? He, too, was afflicted with tongues.

"The kind of leadership I speak about," said Josie, practically shouting, "knows how to court the power of the people. It pays attention to the wishes of the populace. It will curb the almighty power of monopolies. It will not tolerate fat bureaucrats."

"You wish to help the Bolsheviks?"

She was rocked back on her heels. She claimed she had no wish to help the Bolsheviks, but neither did she wish to stop them.

"Their females count as well. Their women can be anything that they decide to be."

Closed eyelids, that was all.

The Elder Dewey led the way. The Elder knew that it was now or never. He had laid siege, successfully, to many crusted sinners in the past.

Clad in his Sunday best and wielding an umbrella to brave whatever weather, he was determined not to leave until he had a

firm solution in his pocket. It had been many years since he'd gone on a mission quite as clear.

Behind him, single file, walked Lizzy, Daisy, Little Melly, Doctorjay, Archie and Noralee. All came well fortified with Truth. So what if Josephine had on her side the force of learned argument—which was already hardly possible!—they had experience on their side, and common sense, and unity, and best of all, the Gospel. And they had strength in numbers.

"We need to have a talk. A smooth but long talk, Josephine."

She heated, reddened like a stove. Her forehead rested in her hands. She hardly looked up, but the sheen on her face became deeper.

"How are you, Josephine?"

"Much better than could be expected."

"Still working in the Red Cross office?"

"I am."

"What are you doing there?"

"I'm speeding social victory."

"I'm glad to hear that. Mighty glad. I called a special prayer breakfast for next Saturday to help speed social victory. I'm sure you'll want to join us."

"I'm having trouble with my goiter."

"Coming to prayer breakfast will do wonders for your goiter. You take it to heart and let it bear fruit."

"My goiter?"

"Our prayer breakfast, Josie. What's the matter? Are you sick?"

She wouldn't even rise to shake the Elder's hand or take his overshoes. She sat there, by the window, defiant and alone, while Lizzy, Noralee and Little Melly marched past her chair into her kitchen to start the hospitality.

The Elder Dewey put his felt hat on the hat rack, his umbrella in the corner. "Now, Josie. Pay attention. We have come to check on certain facts—"

"The facts are no secret. I am up for election. I'll probably win. I'll be happy to give you some facts. We have twenty-

seven chapters. Five hundred and thirty eight members. Besides Kansas, we embrace Colorado. Nebraska. Missouri. Oklahoma. We are a political force the House and Senate can't ignore. Our platform calls for—"

"Where will it end?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Out with the truth!"

"We have ambitions, Dewey. Legitimate ambitions."

"To be elected governor?"

"Why not? What's wrong with that? The day will come when we'll have female governors."

"Look at yourself. Is that a wedding ring that's on your finger? Does that not mean a thing? Someone spied you in the Workers' Hall. By going there, you undermine your spouse who has a payroll of three hundred workers. You give the enemy support. Has all good sense deserted you?"

She raised her chin. "With little standing in my own community, I am invited everywhere in Wichita."

"I heard you talked Jan into buying stock in airships, Josephine?"

"I did."

"These thoughts come straight from Satan."

"I am a human being."

"We're human beings. We're not birds. We aren't meant to fly. My flivver's pulling forty miles an hour." The Elder deftly changed his strategy. He started shouting angrily: "If God had meant for Jan to fly, He would have grown him feathers!"

She shouted back: "If God had meant for you to have a flivver, Dewey, He would have grown you rubber wheels!"

To say that he was shocked was putting it politely, for never within living memory had anybody ever spoken cheekily to any preacher, mediator between man and God.

"That's blasphemy!"

She would yet eat those words in public, if Dewey had his way. He kept on chewing furiously, while pondering a comeback.

"An air road," announced Josephine, triumphantly, "is in the works, and it will make all flivvers obsolete. It's true! It will stretch all the way from Washington to Apanlee—"

"She's looney. Like her Papa," the clan concluded silently. Their eyes were round as saucers.

"Who," ventured Dewey slowly, "would want to fly to Apanlee? You hear these horror stories—"

"I would," chirped Lizzy, desperate, a master at diffusing. "I never quite lost hope of visiting with Uncle Benny, and to embrace and kiss him joyfully."

But Josie, being Josie, was on a roll, and would not be restrained. She curled her tongue around another argument. She said, maliciously: "Don't get all hopped up, Dewey, about a thing you just don't understand. In Wichita, there is another world. You might as well inhabit caves, for all your backwardness. You're out of step. You plain have no idea! No idea! The world is changing, Dewey. It's changing for the better. A speaker at the Workers' Hall predicted just the other day that workers' wages soon will double, and next in line—"

"Fine pickles. Fine pickles," said Little Melly, crunching noisily. "Is that a special recipe? Do you mind sharing it?"

"I do."

Ear to ear, that was the spinster's grin. "Is that Sears coffee, Josie?"

"It is."

"Oh, hi there, Jan. Come in. Come in. Come in and join us, will you? Guess what? We're visiting with Josie. How is the weather treating you? Still fighting the jackrabbits?"

Jan nodded warily, while standing in the door. "What's up? What's going on? Are you folks ganging up on Josie?"

Jan was a tired man; he had been up since dawn. The previous summer had been short and searing, the winter full of ice; the hungry rabbits came from nowhere, eating everything that grew. His eyes went from one caller to the other.

"What has she done this time? Another Bolshie plot? Move over, Little Melly. Let me sit down. The rabbits are a pest.

They're simply everywhere you step." Lopsided smile: "Just like the suffragists."

That's how Jan put a stop to almost any argument—he pulled the stinger out.

But Josie was, by then, beyond the bounds of reason. The laughter was at her expense. She turned a fiery red. "Jan, will you please not trivialize—"

He gently shushed a puppy that was gnawing on his shoelace. "What's up? That's all I asked. I need some peace and quiet. I just don't understand—"

"If Jan can't understand, who can?" asked Dewey righteously. "We have an argument that's begging to be settled."

"Well, fill me in. What do we need to settle?"

"For one, this airship business, Jan." The Elder felt a rush of blood; he saw Jan flinch and knew that he struck near the truth. "Out with the truth. Is that a Hebrew deal? How much did you invest? The church is still unfinished."

"Travel by airship all over the globe," coaxed Josie, "is only a hair's breadth away. Right, Jan? Am I not right, Jan? Tell them why airship bonds are now considered prime investments."

"You're right," said Jan, still looking puzzled. This was a weary argument, with more miles than his flivver's. "We've been over all this before. It's very simple, really. If you put all your savings in a jar, it doesn't grow. It stays the same amount. Whereas investment in a bank that deals in stocks and bonds—"

"No doubt the money grabbers put that idea in your head by using Josie as a decoy to pull your dollars from your pockets. Where will it end? The usurers again! They'll be your downfall, Jan. They're using Josephine."

"Not so. I never—"

"That's not how we do business." The Elder spoke past Josie. "We know the value of an honest dime. Our money does not grow on trees and is not meant to multiply through wrongful interest in stock of dubious value. Remember how our Lord went out and broke Himself a switch and drove the usurers right out of their own temple?"

You could have cut the tension with a knife. To break it,

Lizzy spoke a bit too crisply. "Look. Look. It's just a little airline."

"That's right," said Josie, flaming now. "It has a board. It has a nice portfolio. I had this tip. A friend of mine gave me this tip. I merely passed it on. I mentioned it to Jan. It is an excellent investment—"

Dewey kept on slurping thoughtfully. "Sears coffee, huh? A bit expensive, no? Add just a little bit more milk. Oh, thank you! Thank you kindly, Lizzy! I like my coffee pretty strong. But not that strong. What friend?"

"One of the Finkelsteins."

"I see."

"He knows a lot about the stock exchange—"

"You bet they do. You betcha! The banksters will yet be the downfall of your husband, Josie." The Elder Dewey shifted his pale gaze as though it were a timid searchlight and let it rest on Jan. "Speak up. What do you have to say in your defense? What is the sense of flying? Why not keep both feet firmly planted on the ground? The airline's just a cover, right? This business about Russian aid is just a cover? The money really goes to this—this silly drive to get the female vote locked in place? You know that that is only the beginning. Away from pots and pans!"

The treacherous pink that Jan knew so well, the color he loved and feared, ran slowly into Josie's neckline. She took a trembling breath, but she restrained herself. She spoke as calmly as she could, which was no small endeavor. "It is the future, folks. Before this century is out, the sky will be awash—"

"I think that your wife, Jan, is running a fever," boomed Doctorjay. "She needs to be cooled down." He poked his elbow in Jan's ribs. "What did I tell you just the other day? Remember?"

"Excuse me," said Josie, "but it must be said. What Jan does with his hard-earned money is none of anybody's business. It's not your business, Dewey. It's not your business, Lizzy. It's not your business, Cousin Melly. It's private. Private. It's just between my husband and myself—"

"Not quite," said Dewey Epp. He studied her with bitter joy.

"One thing we know with certainty: our good Lord calls the shots. The Lord gave Jan his riches. Lavishly. Our Lord may well decide to take them back if you dilute your husband—"

"I'm not diluting Jan. I'm not diluting anyone. I'm not diluting anything. I am giving the future my best—"

"Are you being paid for all that pecking that you do, down at the Red Cross quarters?"

"Male wages! Here. Try my watermelon rind."

"And do you really need the money?"

"Not really. No. Do you?"

Jan shifted with discomfort. "Every penny of her wages, Dewey," he apologized against his will, "goes straight into the Red Cross kitty. She donates every penny."

"Sure. And from there, straight into Hebrew coffers."

"Come on, now. You exaggerate."

"You know the Red Cross is a cover for all the Jews' shenanigans. They like to hide behind those tax exempt foundations."

"She's merely rolling bandages and keeping track of the supplies. She's doing nothing wrong. She doesn't cause anyone harm—"

"Jan, I can surely speak for myself—"

Jan started puffing on his pipe. "And here I was trying to help."

He started buttering a roll. He stretched his legs and turned to Doctorjay: "Let's change the subject now. The jackrabbits are ruining me. I've set a hundred traps—"

Here's where the story should have ended, as it had ended every single time with every single argument before. Jan's veto should have settled it. He still had veto power.

At least they thought he did.

But not this time. Josie's collar grew hotter and hotter. She looked like a goose about to be plucked. She leaped from her chair as if launched like a rocket.

"All right! Let's have it out. Once and for all, let's have it out. I feel proud and privileged to help build a better tomorrow by fostering equality today. Equality for all! For myself! For

my six lovely girls! For the women of America! Right here in my own country. Right here at my front door!"

"If you have extra time and extra energy," suggested Dewey Epp while flicking dust specks from his trousers, "after having done your household chores and charities and place cards for the Chamber, why don't you knit your bit?"

"Knit my bit?" shrieked Josie, trembling.

"Knit your bit," repeated Dewey, leaning back, exhaling softly.

"Knit your bit," said Daisy, dusting herself with a napkin.

"Knit your bit?" said Lizzy, pleadingly, and placed her old and wrinkled hand on Josephine's left knee. "Yes! Knit your bit. That's good advice. That's excellent advice. Just knit your bit, and in the meantime—"

"Knit your bit—" said Little Melly, too, who couldn't help herself. "—why, any woman worth her salt should surely feel both proud and privileged—" She herself had spent months knitting woollies for those handsome Kansas boys while they were sitting in wet trenches. "Jan? It's your turn. Tell her. Tell her! Tell her that she should knit her bit."

"Yes. Knit your bit," said Jan, who liked to tease and tickle, who always made a joke to ease the tension in his kitchen when females worked each other into a serious funk. He threw his hands up with a laugh that had an edge in it. "Why can't you knit your bit? Just knit your bit. That would solve many problems."

It was oblique, yet it was like a shot. She took a trembling breath and reached for something deep within.

"Look here. Let's put our cards out on the table. This really isn't about airships, is it? It really isn't about money, is it? This isn't about knitting, is it? This is about the fact that Jan has only sired girls—"

"Six times," thought Lizzy wretchedly, "he heard the midwife say it was a girl, and not a single word!"

Jan twirled his mustache thoughtfully while stirring sugar in his coffee. Daisy expelled three sharp little cries. Old Doctorjay kept swiveling his red mane side to side as though he were a lion. Beside him, Noralee just held her breath and hoped she wouldn't faint. Little Melly inspected a hangnail, which triggered a series

of thoughts. A slow, triumphant light seeped into Dewey's eyes. Doctorjay gave a guffawing laugh. Noralee squirmed in her seat while craning her neck, and no wonder. For now the Elder Dewey had the scent, and it was sweet and righteous in his nostrils. He knew nature's ways; he was getting the Biblical drift. He knew where it said about being a man and having a surplus of daughters while lacking a boy to pass on a fine family name.

"It isn't yet too late, is it?" He surveyed Josephine appraisingly. "You're not yet old enough to mothball your last diaper?" The Elder lurched forward. He went for the jugular swiftly.

"I must ask a question that is of a personal nature. You aren't exactly a spring chicken, Josie. How much time is left? How old are you now?"

"Meanwhile, eat. Meanwhile, eat," Lizzy practically wept.

This was a hand grenade. He carefully pulled out the pin and let fly: "How many daughters, Josie? Five? Six?" You couldn't blame Dewey for having lost count, for the birthdays of females were seldom recorded. "But where, Josephine, is Jan's son?"

She fished a cigarette from her pocket, and a match. She lit that cigarette, and she filled her lungs. She filled them just as deeply as she could. She stood before her husband now, on tiptoes practically, a flaming female anarchist, blowing smoke in his face and shame into his heart.

"Health permitting. Health permitting," said Josie with icy precision.

It was as if sharp lightning struck and broke a tree right down the middle. At her words, a silence fell. It numbed. It withered everything. According to family legend, that is how Josephine, near the end of her childbearing years, pierced the heart of a very good man. Time would erase most any other trespass Josie had amassed. These words would never die. They stored within the clan's collective memory. No choice was left. She brought it on herself.

About the matrimonial sequel, both partners would be silent, and we can only guess. But the outcome was this: She lost, and he won. His nails tore away, but he won.

# Chapter 50

As the war on the Old Continent drew to an anguished close, Josie gave birth to a fine baby boy.

She lay in her pillows, gray and exhausted. Her age didn't help; it would be her last, it had been a difficult birth. The global flu that claimed its victims by the millions nearly did her in as well. It hit so hard in certain parts of Kansas, no room was left in church for all the funeral wreaths.

It was a somber time. The relatives sat in respectful silence before the mystery of death, while Dewey passed the plate.

The globe still turned. The seasons came and went.

A war was winding down; several monarchies had fallen; democracy had proven superior to other forms of government; all wanted to get back-to-normalcy, as Little Melly put it.

Lizzy slipped on a watermelon rind and was laid up for weeks. Dewey said successful prayers over an afflicted child. Little Melly settled wisely a dispute between two feuding neighbors—one owner owned a goose intent on nesting in an outhouse, the other owned the outhouse chosen by the goose. The cataclysmic question: who owned that set of goslings?

Two simultaneous weddings were announced—two sisters marrying two brothers. Two houses were duly enlarged. Two rooms in the attic were added.

The oldsters passed quietly on. New babies arrived. The darning needles flew; the ladies of the Sewing Club conversed at length about the merits of the Savior.

The church still held the universe in place. The porch steps were for gossip.

The relatives from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, who took advantage of the spell of harmony that came with Josie staying in the hospital much longer than the norm, departed finally with many hugs and kisses, but not before they telephoned; that was the ritual.

"The menace of the suffragists," they told the folks back home, "did not cause havoc quite as much in Mennotown as we had feared at first. Our folks are stout in Faith."

Lizzy waved them off, relieved, and poured herself a cup of strong, hot coffee before she stripped the sheets. By then, she was waiting for guests from Vancouver who had announced their coming. Before they came, they telephoned, and here is how that went:

"It's your turn, Lizzy. Really."

"No. No. You first. I visited last year."

"Won't we be in the way?"

"Please come and stay. Please do! At least a week. A month?"

"Don't go to any trouble."

"I won't. I won't. Please. Come next week. If you don't come and visit me, my heart will burst with sorrow."

Lizzy's world was restored to acceptable rules. So what if she was still up to her ears in household chores, in cleaning up post-Saskatoon? She glowed with blessed fervor. She knew her relatives, knew all their wiles. She knew that they'd show up when she was still arm-deep in suds, the better to gossip craftily behind her back and think they were not heard.

"Please come before the icicles begin to drip, " she stressed, to show that when it came to extra guests—why, she slept soundly.

Always. She was her neighbors' better any day. She set a lavish table. Lizzy wasn't like some folks she knew, who didn't even sweep. Her sheets were crisp, her recipes flawless, her household staples locked in place, to the last jar and bucket. Come summer time, her cows walked past their ankles in the lushest grass imaginable—no lack of butter, cream, or cheese.

*Ach!* Gossip about Mennotown telephonically? Just let them only try!

The relatives might drop in, claiming they would stay a week and then stay for a year: but she was well prepared. Her milk house and her smoke house, too, now came with electricity. In olden days, there was the added chore of dipping candles, but no more—with modern electricity, you pulled a string or flipped a switch; that's all there was to that.

By then, the telephone was commonplace. The world was changing drastically. Modernity was on the march. Not even Dewey hinted any more that it was Lucifer that ran along those wires.

Jan Neufeld was a happy man; he had a brand new son. He even took a day off work, smack in the middle of the week. He donned his finery and visited his wife at Brookside Hospital.

It was late afternoon. The air was chill outside, but inside all was cozy. In his gnarled fist Jan held a bundle of forget-me-nots made from crepe paper and starched twine. Across his face, there stretched a smile as wide as the Kansas horizon.

There was a screen in front of Josie's bed to cut down on unhealthy drafts. A sign said she preferred no visitors.

Jan pushed it aside and sat down on the edge of her bed.

She did not drop her gaze, but it was blind. It held no love. It held no anger either.

The flames kept leaping in the charcoal pan the nurse had set up near the bed to toast the mother's cheeks a bit, but not a glimmer of the dancing fire reflected in her eyes. For quite a while, Jan looked at her in silence.

She veiled herself as closely as she could. A force drove her

into herself.

In the end, he tried to tease: "What am I in for now?"

The silence filled the sickroom, floor to ceiling, wall to wall. No fire could melt it away.

"Say something, Josie. Please."

She faced her husband fully. "You pinned me. Like an insect."

He took her hand and held it lovingly between his hardened palms. He cleared his throat. "I used to think that Dewey knew more about heaven and hell than I did. Now I'm not so sure."

There was no fury now in Josie, only a silence, thick as the fog that veiled the chimneys in November. She looked at him, but she was far away.

He told her awkwardly: "That's some baby, Josie. Beautiful. Like you. Look at his tapered fingers."

She spoke at last. "He will be first in all his classes. He will grow up to be an artist and a dreamer—"

And the writing was plain on the wall. But she said it low-key, almost hushed, and Jan was clearly in no mood to challenge her; he never tired of her whims; he was, in fact, quite overcome; it was as though a gloved hand had been clopped right across his mouth; the words she might have longed to hear just wouldn't come.

"The war is over now," he said, instead, and that was that. He thought that that sufficed. The baby boy stirred gently, and Jan's eyes clouded over.

"I ask for your forgiveness. If it makes a difference."

"It doesn't. It's too late."

He looked as though he had robbed and plundered. She looked as though she had taken a hammer and driven an icicle straight through her heart.

But greater, vastly greater than his shame and sorrow was his joy. He had a son. He loved her as he always had, and knew he always would. She was still there, for all to see. But she no longer struggled.

Jan patted her hand and said nothing.

After giving birth to Rarey, Josie was laid up for weeks, remaining weak and feverish. When she could stand again, she leaned her face against the window and wept briefly.

When she was finished giving way, she said with a small smile: "Don't expect me to change overnight. I'll always mix debit and credit—"

Jan placed her chair beside the stove. "A blanket? A cushion? A book?" Still a devoted husband, he shielded her. He petted her. He loved her to excess.

"For Josie, books and happiness are one," he said to Doctorjay, who slapped him on his shoulder, man to man.

In the decade that followed, Jan was increasingly active in public affairs. Three years in a row, he was voted the fundraising chairman of Mennotown's Chamber of Commerce. He presided at the Rotary Club and became its District Governor, high honor indeed. He rounded out his generosity by supporting the Needle Club Temperance Drive, which Little Melly chaired.

No doubt in anybody's mind that Jan was Sedgwick County's most respected leader! If a small grandchild skinned a knee, Jan knelt and soothed it.

The president of the United States announced a visit to Topeka to cut the ribbon for the annual state fair. He predicted a progressive future, and everybody cheered. All of Jan and Josie's daughters wore ribbons in their buttonholes for Lizzy's splendid calves. Those girls took after Lizzy—between them, they milked sixteen cows.

Old Lizzy groomed them carefully. All practiced their *vareniki* with marriage in mind, though one of them—her name, quite tellingly, was Wichita!—was clearly on the plain side. No wonder Josie spruced her up. With a mouthful of malice, Little Melly dropped dark hints.

"The right man," Little Melly hissed behind her handkerchief to no one in particular but loud enough for anyone to hear, "will have to come along, then close his eyes, before he marries

Wichita."

A few folks raised their heads.

"It's now or never, Wichita," urged Little Melly, who spoke from hard experience; her chance had slipped between her fingers. "Don't sleep away our luck. Don't clatter when you set the table. Don't trample on your chances. Be nice to Archibald."

The girl blew her nose in her apron and fled while shedding tears. The spinster shouted after her, firing her parting shot: "You hear me? Pay attention. It will be touch and go."

She told bystanders: "*Ach!* Does she think, foolishly, that fellows grow on trees?"

That was a malicious remark. As such, it was open to challenge. But Josie let the dagger pass, unusual for her. Her thoughts were somewhere else.

Jan ran his fingers through his earth and felt it crumbe in his fingers.

He bent down to the newborn, and told him: "The times are bright with hope."

In his Bible, Jan Neufeld wrote with trembling fingers: "The Lord has shed his blessings. His name is Peet. Peet Neufeld, named after a respected ancestor."

Josie did not contradict him openly. She said as softly as she could, glancing at her lap: "You name him what you will. I'll always call him Rarey—"

In weeks to come, she systematically surrendered all that she had cherished in the past. She parted with her looking glass. She gave her parasol to Abigail. She mothballed her red scarf. Her yellow pad flew in the fire where slogans turned to ashes. At Doctorjay's insistence, she wrote a long poem to spruce up the Fourth of July, and she didn't mistake a lake for the sky, nor vice versa.

Not that the change was all that radical. No one changes overnight, and Josie didn't either. The best that could be said of her was this: she tried. She genuinely tried.

She might take Lizzy's rocking chair, but did she rock it?

No. She sat there, motionless, and stared into a void.

The flu postponed the female victory, but in the end, they had the vote; yet life was still the same.

Jan bought a brand new traction engine plow to add to his Goliath fleet. He built a bigger barn to house his mother's cows.

Churchgoing. Childbearing. Funerals. Picnics.

"To each his own," decided Little Melly evenly.

She knew a woman's brain was not as capable. She knit. She mended. She embroidered a shaving container for Archie, who was a bit foppish in manner. The relations of the sexes were still a mystery to Little Melly, but even she could see—her Archie was rather a sissy.

Romantically speaking, you had to call him slow. He had a girl's soft cheeks. A Donoghue had noticed his emotional delay and scribbled "queer" across his jacket. The snickers never stopped.

For Little Melly, prim and neat, that was a nasty shock. Now was the time for forming proper habits. She knew she had to have a first-rate talk with Archibald—but how? The words just weren't there. She still was largely virginal in thought. Experience was missing.

As time went on, she worried more and more. So much did Little Melly worry over Archibald she once milked the last drop from a cow and let its calf go hungry. But what she lacked in first-hand facts, determination rounded out. In the end, Little Melly put down her needle and put on her hat. The prairie seethed with rumors.

A letter came from Russia. A second. Then a third. She did not even open them. They caused no stir in Josie. No longer did she thirst for news that had to do with politics. All that was now behind her, thankfully.

When visitors arrived to see how she was doing, she filled their empty cups. She did her best to cook acceptable *vareniki.* She cultivated interest in cupcake recipes. She stirred her pride

into her mashed potatoes and smiled while doing so, a castle ghost.

But the Finkelstein pamphlets were gone—hallelujah! The female aggression was gone—praise the Lord!

When she and Lizzy now conversed, they did so calmly, without shouting, and once an argument was settled, they always hugged each other.

Now very old and nearly blind, old Lizzy went limp with relief. She knew that all of this was wondrous beyond words.

"God mend you, child. God mend you," she said to Josephine, now sporting many wrinkles, like any other woman of her age.

"No prayers are in vain," she added for good measure, thus gently nudging Josephine, who still did not reply.

Most striking of all was this silence. She had run out of words.

As August gave way to September, a doctor came from Wichita, pulled out a dangling instrument, stuck it in both his ears, and listened to her heart. She sat there like a shell, forgetting to button her blouse, until Lizzy, peeking through the keyhole, rushed in and pushed the *medicus* aside to help her back to modesty.

In essence, she had given up the battle.

The decade that historians later called the Roaring Twenties did not stir Josephine. Time and Old Lizzy's sour cream took off the edge of sadness in the end. The townfolks took her pessimistic moods for granted and ignored them. The trick was to outlast them.

She still backed mild, progressive causes, and every now and then, she went to check on friends in Wichita. By nighttime, she was back.

No longer did she see the need to speak those sharp and hurting words that wounded relatives. No longer did she buy a paper when she could borrow one. And best of all, no longer did she argue irritatingly that if you traveled long enough, the west became the east.

Not even the Rotarian lunches meant anything to her. Her husband had his proper place, and she had hers, and that was

that. The neighborhood relaxed.

For Christmas, she bought Jan a compost tumbler, and he bought her a butter churn, identical to Lizzy's. As season followed season, she even joined the Doily Club, without a doubt the most prestigious female enterprise in town, because she realized the cash raised from the annual fair booths that Little Melly ran would help bring Christ to erring heathen in Borneo.

"Why not?" she said, and shrugged.

When Dewey pushed his luck and told her: "Josephine! Good deeds alone won't do. Your Savior died for you—" she said in weary resignation: "I know. I know. While writhing on the cross—"

He knew when to back off. As a guest on her davenport couch, you showed your respect by eating and drinking. Dewey inspected his plate and found there no cause for complaint. Ham, cured with the finest corncob smoke. Peanuts. Raisin bread. Crisp gherkins from ripe brine. Everything in right proportion, daintily arranged.

"Harrumph," he said at last, half-grudgingly.

"Bless you!" said Josephine.

Once she was overheard to say: "It's people who invent the gods; it's not the other way around," but Dewey checked that out against the Scriptures and said that that was progress.

"That's progress. Real progress," said Dewey.

He was glad to let bygones be bygones. He kept an anxious watch on her, on call to help her in her struggle against sin; he even told her so, but that was mere formality.

"Just call on me. Call anytime. Just anytime at all," said Dewey.

She thanked him for his offer with a dilapidated smile.

"Not even God," said she, now echoing her husband, "can alter last year's harvest."

Glad for the hard-won victory, the Elder Dewey nodded soothingly. Here was a lukewarm Christian, but that was better by a mile than to see Josie strut through the entire neighborhood the

haughty Hottentot of yore.

"Be sure to remember my work in your prayers," he told her, and gave her a pat on the cheek.

For pray she did. She said she did; she told Jan so; she said she genuinely tried, and since she never lied—not her worst enemy could claim the Devil ever made her speak the smallest lie!—the Elder Dewey was relieved.

No need to boot her from his church and thus shame Jan, more generous than ever.

# Chapter 51

After Satan's hooves had clattered eastwards at the break of a stunned dawn, numb neighbors crept out of the bushes: "*Bozhe moi! Bozhe moi!* At Apanlee, did anyone survive?"

Some did, but many died. The earth took them back, one by one.

A mass grave, shoveled with the help of grieving neighbors, enfolded the remains of Hein, the hunchback and his gentle Dorothy, all of Marleen's beloved progeny except the twins and Mimi, and dozens of ill-fated relatives who happened to be visiting. No one found a trace of Jonathan, although Natasha kept on keening for the little boy long after the others gave up.

She was like a desperate cat in search of her favorite kitten. "Who'll cuddle you? Who'll sing to you? Who'll tuck you in at night?"

The twins tried to comfort their Baba. "He's asleep in God's mercy, Natasha—"

Sooner the sea will give up her dead than a survivor will give up his Faith. Why else had they been spared? Why two of them, alike?

By the grace of a merciful God; that was why.

Everything was gray on gray: the earth, the sky, the people's faces. The only thing that shone was Faith. It shone in the twins like a beacon. Engraved upon their inner eye remained a night beyond the grasp of human comprehension—and now, before them, what?

That was the question mark.

Behind them, stiffening their spines, lay centuries of persecuted piety that had carved as a prime theme this: all suffering was pre-ordained. All tears were meant to wash one's eyes so as to better read the Ten Commandments. That's what they now believed.

For centuries, Faith yielded ready warmth. Now it sprang into flame.

Never keener on the Gospel than the rest of Apanlee, two young survivors found themselves now on the threshold of maturity, drenched with their Faith, consumed by Faith, enraptured and enthralled by Faith. Faith suffused every thought. Faith sustained and controlled them completely. Faith had become the critical ingredient. Without it, nothing balanced.

How else could they have borne the knowledge that they had lifted not one little finger to stop the slaughter of their kin? They had hidden themselves in the chimney.

They knew survivors' guilt before that phrase was coined. With Faith locked into place by tragedy, the earth rotated on its axis—and right around the earth, the sun. A wobbly earth—but still.

It's strange with Faith and those it wins by soothing woes the likes of which no animal can feel. Faith will not grow a leg. It cannot make the sun set in the east, nor make a river run uphill. And yet, the laws of nature, grim and rigid, will matter not one whit to a survivor who needs to set his guilt aside by reading travesty as meaning.

For two young men, their forebears' Faith, until then largely ritual, became a thing apart. It cast its iron roots into the bloody

soil of Apanlee—ghost country now, where those who managed to survive lost every other earthly gift of reason.

Faith spoke its litany hypnotically—the kind of litany you hear at any funeral: "And who am I to question Thee? Thy will be done. Forever."

That's Faith. It softens, and it blurs.

It calmed the twins. Had it not been for Faith, they told themselves, could they have faced a mirror? They clung to Faith with a defiant loyalty. Their eyes were smoky suns.

Faith helped Marleen as well. Faith spoke to her with velvet tongues. Here's what Marleen kept hearing, and what she fervently believed: those murdered children, one by one, once put into her loving arms to live a long and fruitful life, fell accidentally into the Lord's soft palms like beads from a cut string.

That was her Faith. She had no other choice. It was as if she knelt before the smallest of all flames. She put both hands around it, cupping it and shielding it, knowing that if anguish quenched that tiny source of warmth, she might as well be dead.

"He'll dry all eyes, and ease all pain," Marleen said many times in years to come, and who would have the heart to call that sham? To call that travesty? She needed Faith far more than doubt—how else could she have lived?

She shuddered, now and then, as if from cudgel blows, but she echoed her psalms as she should. Thus did she lean on Faith—not for those she had lost, but on behalf of those who still clung to the margin—her twin sons and her only daughter, Mimi.

She didn't even add into her sad equation the whimpering small speck of life for whom, tomorrow, if not sooner, the grave was waiting, too.

Faith was not all that potent in Natasha. She was a realist.

She saw no choice at all, she keened—as the days faded slowly and Apanlee faced its first winter without grain—but to assume that her favorite youngster had choked on the flames, along with the chickens and ducks. She only hoped, she wept, while dab-

bing at her swollen eyes, her little darling's agony was swift. She hoped, but she knew better. And little difference did it make when the twins tried to soften her grieving. "Where little Jonathan is now, there is no sorrow and no pain."

She was not easily deceived. If he was dead, death had come hard. If he was still alive—as well he might be; who could say?—would days to come be any easier for a small and gentle boy used to his honey spoon?

She hoped and feared, she wept, that he was still alive and one day would return. Where might he be? Had the assassins carried off her valentine?

With trembling hands, she carefully inscribed the missing youngster's name on the back of her favorite icon.

"His name was Jonathan," she wrote in awkward letters. Let not the saints forget! She kept that icon hidden in a jar behind her onion strings.

"These days," she told Marleen, "you cannot be too careful."

"Yes. Many hazards. Many hazards." Marleen just nodded, sparingly. "Particularly for the twins."

The thugs had run their bayonets right through the spine of every handy Bible. The government had since declared that God was dead, then added injury to blasphemy by labeling His helpers parasites, and her two sons, now yearning to serve Faith by tending to the vineyards of their Lord, could find themselves ensnared by faceless shadows, hidden hands, if they did not watch out.

"Where will it end, Marleen?"

No one knew. No one could even guess. The New World Order had arrived. Both dreaded the knock on the blood-spattered window: "The censor wants to see you."

The night light barely flickered. The frost clung to the autumn leaves. The halls of Apanlee, still hung with many ancestors, were dank and drafty as though overcast by fog.

"He who gave us our blessings lavishly in richer times," Marleen said to Natasha, "can also take them back."

Natasha only shrugged. The anarchists? Hell belched them up and took them back! That was her own opinion. The dreadful tsars were gone, the government proclaimed repeatedly the saints were dead as well; the church stood dark and mildewed.

"Red forever! Red forever!" came the shouts of visionary leadership that kept on rolling over corpses as though they were but logs. The pentagram flashed gaudily from many grimy collars.

Marleen kept hugging her knees. Subdued—but not destroyed! For she had Faith! She wore it like a purple heart—that faith of hers that told her suffering gave meaning.

Her former life, now altered beyond recognition, lay in sad ruins at her feet, but Marleen did not point a finger at Him who set the pride of centuries aflame. It was clear her spirit was breaking; almost all of her children were dead; but still, she said nothing; she never once questioned the Lord.

She kept cradling her Faith—that was that.

A potent elixir.

It numbed the blinding mass of pain where once she had carried a heart.

All was survival now.

Most earthly wishes had fallen by the wayside. More than just the woe, the guilt, the sorrow, and the loss—this was a trial, a test. Marleen was bowing to the will of God as though she had been knighted.

"We must have Faith. That's it." This was her litany. She came from an unbroken line—ten generations of martyrs. She drew on Faith and fortitude; she said not one rebellious word against God's bloody handiwork. He had taken her children by bullet and hatchet and had softened the earth with their blood. He wounded, then healed. He gave, and then withheld.

"It must be true," Natasha countered softly, not in the mood to argue.

"It's true. He is the staff on which we lean—" Such was Marleen's despotic Faith, abiding and relentless.

"All right. All right. It's true."

Now, as before, Natasha was merely a nanny, a maid, but when she sat next to Marleen and watched her reach for Faith as though for food and drink, she had no choice; she had to ask herself, a realist: "Marleen's God is a God of love? What kind of love would drink that kind of blood?"

Natasha and Marleen no longer quarreled with each other. All that was yesterday.

Natasha cast shy glances—Marleen looked brutally abused, all bent and crushed, a collapsed butterfly, her wings pulled from their sockets. There was no point in making matters worse.

As for herself, she would have liked a fierce and crafty argument. Instead, Natasha parlayed several wonder-working saints. She lined them up and scolded them repeatedly.

She read them a long list of pressing needs. She launched into brisk common sense. She liked to keep her irons in the fire.

She asked for many special favors while slowly sucking on a crust. The crust was meant for dinner, but she would have it now. "There's five of us still left," she told her vacant saints so they would not forget. She paused, then added, swallowing: "Well, six, to be exact."

The pygmy child was still alive and stirring. She kept it in the half-charred wicker basket and hummed soft lullabies.

It had been a game to cut down the old—terror and fury had helped. Now came the end result.

The plow was dull; the treasury empty; the granaries put to the torch. No meager bowl of cabbage soup, the hungry muzhik wailed.

Where was the sauerkraut? No boiled buckwheat dripping with bacon. Not even a salted cucumber. Nothing of substance was left for the starving. The destitute peasants kept shaking their heads, refusing to climb out of their blankets.

Instead of freedom—fear.

Instead of bread—hunger.

Instead of clothes—rags.

Instead of discipline and pride—despair.

"Seize what's before you," the muzhik was told, while the New Order was strangling the old, but once you shot the ducks and chickens, they were gone; and so were the eggs with which to raise a flock.

"Give us the land," the muzhik had shouted, but now that he had it, what good did it do? The tools were still lacking; the will to rebuild the Old Order was gone.

"We haven't seed enough to fill a single bucket," Marleen said to her sons, who answered back in whispers. "Though in good time, the Lord will surely provide. This He has promised us."

It was no secret that it wasn't safe to speak of God, now that the country had a million eyes and ears. Most people learned to whisper early.

Only Natasha paid little heed. She spoke her own mind, now as then. She said what she wanted to say.

"Not even God," Natasha said, who knew most German proverbs well, "can alter last year's harvest."

Natasha did not tell Marleen that she had chanced upon a drifter, who brought her word that he had seen her son.

"I saw him. It was Dominik," the drifter told Natasha.

"He is alive?" she cried, as any mother would have cried, but did not tell Marleen. Right then and there, Natasha thrilled to several possibilities that might ease everybody's lot. "Can you be sure? Don't tell me lies—"

"Why would I lie? I saw him with my own eyes."

"Why, years slipped by, and not a single word!" Natasha chatted with the drifter while helping him to prick a blister. "What is he doing? Has he become a ticket counter? A useful bureaucrat?"

"Step by step and rung by rung, right up the Party ladder," the drifter said and spat.

"Don't tell a soul," she begged, shame burning in her face.

Though Comrade Lenin was believed to be a perfect man who would do wonders for her country—bring to the Motherland vast benefits—Natasha cradled many doubts. Natasha rocked the baby. She was a servant still, as loyal now as then, though posters told her otherwise.

Enormous posters, painted red, all told her she was free to walk through any door she pleased. She still preferred the back. Old habits were deeply ingrained. No matter what the Party said, as far as she could see, not all that much had changed.

What could have pleased her more, back in the days before the Revolution, than yet another baby to whom to coo and sing? She had one now. This one was pitiful, but even so—a baby was a baby. How could her heart be stony to a baby?

Marleen gave it nary a glance, so busy was she to hold fast to the soil that was still hers to ready for the grain.

Marleen walked the fields with her tormenting thoughts, an aging beggar woman, gray and grim, where once her martyred husband's grandfather had walked a king of wheat.

To grow another harvest would take three hundred workers. Tractors. Fuel. And rubles. Lots of rubles. The banks now belonged to the people—but where, dearest Lord, was the cash?

There was dearth in the heart of her country. There were holes at her elbows and knees.

Factories idled. Piers rotted. Granaries, put to the torch, stood black and desolate. Mice gnawed on the grain in the government bins. Yet power to the proletariat! And freedom to the masses!

What could they do with it? The country's treasury was empty, the peasants stuck in moral rot, but slogan after slogan kept sprouting from the rooftops. No matter where Marleen walked, they kept on mocking her.

Behind her lay a winter without snow and a bleak spring without a drop of moisture. Few seeds were stirring in the ground, for little had been sowed. Acre on acre of the finest soil lay bare, for death had plowed the fields. The harvest, she knew, would be

famine.

The call of soil stirred in her blood. The days grew long. A farmer started spading. The twins sprang to her side. They worked until they dropped.

Before the year was out, Marleen was sure she'd wrought a meager edge against the looming winter and the growing scarcity of food with her small vegetable patch, though it had not been easy. The plants were spindly from the start. They sprouted, then shriveled and rotted.

By September, hail had pelted down behind her bedroom window, destroying all her efforts. Even the potato harvest was pitifully poor.

Both friend and foe were fainting in the streets. The countryside lay in ruins. The prison courts stood empty. The court house was destroyed. The countless victims of the civil strife lay silent in their unmarked graves. All day, the death carts rumbled.

Survivors faced another woodless, foodless winter. The fields were trampled and torn. The fruit trees were broken and dying.

As the thermometer plummeted, food prices shot up to the sky.

Still: Power to the proletariat! And freedom to the masses!

The peasants in the depth of Russia knew long before the winter storms arrived: not all the slogans in the world could buy a heel of bread.

# Chapter 52

Some people would drop everything, including knitting stitches, as soon as the mail sacks showed up—not Little Melly, though. She had more self-restraint than that.

When she spied the arthritic postman walking up the porch steps, gingerly—for he had told her in strict confidence just where he had that painful bunion—she slowly dried her hands. She raised one eyebrow, archly. "More Jeremiah letters? Just put them over there. Behind that apple crate. As soon as I have time, I'll sort them out for you."

"Another batch." The postman threw the bundle in the basket Little Melly had readied for him. "Well, there they are. More work for you. Do I smell apfelstrudel?"

"Cream and sugar? Just say when. Here. Let me have the lot."

"Are you going to steam-open them?"

"Why, have I ever?" laughed Little Melly, while filling his cup to the rim.

"You have. You have. We all know that you like to get a head-start on the news."

"Just hearsay. That is all." She dimpled at him coyly. "What's new these days in Wichita?"

He knew precisely what powered the spinster. "The suffragists mean business."

"You're telling me?"

"Now that they have the vote, they'll all vote libertarian."

She set her chin but chose to let that pass. She had all afternoon. "Is that a fact?"

"Don't say you weren't warned." He leaned into her face. "Say what you will, there is no stopping them."

"Well, you know me. I have my work cut out. The vineyards of the Lord come first. It's critical. Here's how we counteract."

She hauled three baskets to the fore. The special pamphlets advocating fire trucks with curfew whistles had all been printed and bundled up in Hillsborough. "I personally sorted them—with Archie's help, and Daisy's. Be sure to get them out by Wednesday."

"I will. I will."

She chewed her lower lip. She wanted to say more. In general, she stayed away from politics, but whistles were a worthy cause; she wanted whistles; that was it! For three long years, she and her brother had campaigned for fire trucks with whistles to reinforce the curfew. She'd bent Jan's ear until it practically fell off to make sure that the fire truck committee Jan chaired while sitting on her porch wrote that into their minutes—that fire trucks required whistles; the Donoghues, hot from the war, careening at all hours, were still a bunch of thieves.

The mailman relished his break in routine. "What do we have here? My-my-my!" His smile stretched, ear to ear. This was like feasting on a rooster. "Another letter out of Apanlee. Addressed to Josephine."

She, too, was savoring the moment. "Surprise. Surprise. And so, what else is new?"

She had her own priorities cut out. This distant relative, Marleen, kept writing practically every week, ibut who was she? No one could remember. Not even Josie did, now that her memory

had holes.

And who could still read Russian, this after having lived in Mennotown for decades? Not anyone she knew. This was America.

"Give it to me. Here. I'll take care of it." She quickly snatched the letter. Doctorjay was practically the only one still left of the old immigrants who could decipher Russian, but he was known to be a blabbermouth. She couldn't take that risk. If there was something in that letter to jeopardize the fire trucks, he wouldn't keep it to himself. He never kept a secret.

"The Devil is ringing their bell." The postman was not about to give up. "If Lizzy knew—"

Little Melly beamed as expansively as a lower lip fever blister permitted. "Here. Have another slice." Old Lizzy, too, might get much more excited than was good for her doddering heart.

"A lot of hungry, angry people."

"Apanlee. Apanlee. That's all you hear these days. A hornet's nest. That's all that I can say."

"Well, don't you think—"

"No, I do not. Nobody hates a body without reason."

"That's what I always say."

She spoke in a low voice: "I've had it with this *Rooshian* business. We shouldn't stress this ethnic stuff. That cost my Archie one good eye."

"I must agree with you. These radicals. They like to bellyache."

"All of them, redskins. Gangsters. Why do we trouble our lives with Russia? Don't we have plenty problems of our own? Right here in our own country? Right here at our front door?"

"That's right. We need some law and order around here."

"We need those fire trucks to set a decent curfew, or else the Donoghues—" She kept on knitting furiously. "I've had it with those *Rooshian* friendship rallies! I've had it! Just plain had it!"

"Well, you know Jan. And you know Josie. They have this thing about the past. They keep this warm spot for the *Rooshians*—"

"You're telling me?" Jan might be mum about his plans, but Little Melly had her social service blueprints, too, and was not coy about them. You took an aspirin before you had a headache. You cleaned up your own porch before you started pulling weeds in someone else's yard.

"Give her a leftist cause," the postman kept on needling, "and watch him leaning left."

"What's it to me?"

"He still is putty in her hands. Whatever Josie wants, she gets. That's what folks say."

She was as naked as a sparrow in the spring. She was a cloud that started dripping. She practically choked, but managed to say this: "The Lord works in mysterious ways. That's all I have to say."

He still had several arrows in his quiver. "Last Wednesday, the Rotarians voted Jan head of the Ukrainian Emergency Food—"

She didn't duck. She didn't even flinch. She caught that flying arrow in mid-air.

"I know. I know. It isn't yet every day's evening, is it? Another cup of coffee?" She gave an enigmatic smile. She boasted a secret or two.

"They want to send him off to Russia. They say he'll take her along."

"By airship, right?"

"Your blood boils at the thought?"

She took her slipper off and threw it at the cat. The matter with the Hebrew airline stocks and bonds still rankled. She cleared her throat and launched herself.

"So. Someone has to go. I'll grant you that. They are our relatives. You help your relatives. We've got to send relief. That's what we're all about. To help the needy elsewhere from our abundance here. So let somebody go. Why can't my brother go? Why not let Dewey go? He wants to go. He's willing to do witness. He feels it is the Christian thing to do. He could take Archie, even. Those two don't have this foolish sentiment about the past. They'll see things with impartial eyes. Why must it be

Jan Neufeld?"

"Well, you know why. This *Rooshian* thing is Josie's private nettle."

"In Mennotown," said Little Melly pointedly, "the cause of Russia is popular with some and not at all with others." She blew a speck of dust off her thumb. "This stuff is decades old. We're now Americans. Can we fix everything that's wrong in this big, wicked world? It's none of our business. An ocean lies between us—"

"Some papers claim the Soviet government is slaughtering the people in great numbers—"

"We have no business helping Soviets. They've done some butchering themselves. Haven't they butchered the Lord's Holy Day? They're heathens! Atheists. They exist in a world that we can hardly conceive of—" She and Dewey had discussed the sorry state of Russia at length. No services in Russia. No bells. No prayers to give thanks. "Is that a country worth our money? No wonder our Lord is running out of patience."

"Can you imagine living like that?"

"Can you imagine Sunday without church? A proper Christian takes himself to church to take in an uplifting sermon—"

She loved her Sundays dearly. She cherished every one—the fragrance of coffee and bacon that drifted through the open doors in the early morning hours, the clatter of a milk pail, the smell of the hot iron with which she gave Archie's starched collar a final once-over, the quiet patterns of the pews, the men on one side, the women on the other, their youngsters sleepy in their laps—that was the proper Sunday attitude. All else was blasphemy.

The postman had run out of arrows except one. He now let fly his parting shot. "No word from Uncle Benny yet? What do you think that means?"

"Well, who's to say? It could mean anything."

"Right. Anything."

"Remember what they said about him? If he would only write, we'd know what's going on. Why did he stop? Your guess is as good as my guess. He wasn't ever really one of us. He was half-Jew, half-Christian. Here. Take this last one. For the road. Come

on. Take it. There's more where this one comes from."

"Don't you suppose you should at least let Josie know that there's this bunch of letters that keep on raining from the sky—"

"I'd sooner help the Unitarians," said Little Melly smoothly—and never mind it was the Unitarians who had thrown a decided monkey wrench into her calendar with their malicious Orphan Drive. "If she gets wind of this, you know what she'll do? She's going to head straight for Wichita, try on another hat, and traipse from door to door until she develops large blisters." The shaking palsy that the doctors talked about came out in times like these. Her mouse-colored bun was a-tremble. "I don't want the responsibility. Do you? A letter from this relative, Marleen, whom we don't even know, could push her right over the brink. I'll safekeep it until she's well again. That is the least that I can do, considering—"

"Tsk. Tsk."

"Don't tsk you me! I count on you to keep your lip zipped up. You hear? We don't want Josephine right on the edge of lunacy. Remember how her *papa* snapped?"

The postman winked at her while standing in the door. "Tsk. Tsk. A gentle thing like you?"

She did not reply: let the silence speak for itself! It wasn't that she had no heart; she did; those letters vexed her soul. Those letters all but shouted. *Chleba!* Bread! She still remembered that one word. She had deciphered it. She gave what she could, but enough was enough. She emptied her purse to the poor and the needy—always had, and always would! But if you went by human nature—and she did!—you wanted something back.

A little bit more gratitude. A little bit more piety. There was no reference whatsoever to the mercies of the Lord in those appalling, Russian letters—not even if you used a magnifying glass. And if those letters meant what she assumed they meant—why, then the outcome could be anybody's guess.

That's how it was in Mennotown. Each time another letter came from Russia, the spinster stuffed her conscience with some cotton and put it with the others. She kept them all well-hidden in a box. That box was stored beneath her bed, and she had pad-

locked it. She knew what she knew, which was plenty.

Jan contracted for several up-to-date, steam-powered harvesters. He kept some for himself to benefit his fleet; he planned to ship the others overseas to give the needy Russian farmers a needed helping hand.

He made the purchase on favorable credit. He had the fattest bank account in all of Sedgwick County, but still he bought on time. The reason was: it was a package buy, and that reduced the rate. Jan knew he couldn't wait. He was immersed in serious labor struggles that cost him sleep and cash.Some people thought that odd, for Mennotowners estimated Jan was worth more than a hundred thousand dollars.

The aftermath of war was gain; the price of wheat went up; the price of feed went down; life was more lush than ever. You could buy fine-tuned flivver jokes at bargain-basement cost: ten dozen for a nickel. Doctorjay used them to cheer up his elderly patients and help them forget their arthritis. These jokes included jokes about three Methodists, two Lutherans and a Jew, all trying to do business with each other.

These stories made the rounds. Sometimes, the Donoghues were thrown into the story line, which weakened the punch line but added in glee. When Doctorjay shared one such joke with Abigail, both laughed until they gasped.

As year piled up on year, so piled up Jan's worries: the Donoghues still eyed his property with eyes of bitter envy.

A bothersome crowd were the Donoghue kids—all more tenacious than weeds. When they were angered by a whim, they started throwing stones and bottles.

A constable arrived periodically and hauled them off to jail for trading stolen property, but before sunset they were back. The Donoghues loomed large, what with their matches and their threats. Some folks had their suspicions about peculiar prairie fires. That's where the fire trucks came in. Let Russian troubles wait. The fire trucks came first.

Even in the best of times, the Donoghues were difficult, but

now the war had coarsened them; they were insufferable; they needed brakes and limits. Not one of them knew how to carve a farm out of the grass of Kansas.

They often stood and stared, comparing. They kept on singing loudly at all hours. They teased poor Archibald to death for lacking facial hair.

The Christmas fund included them—not that it made a difference. The list of their needs kept growing. They claimed they needed this; they needed that—beds, kettles, chairs, and coats, along with socks and toweling. They wouldn't let their children be inspected. They suffered from a lot of city-bred diseases. They even fancied peep shows. Little Melly caught one spying on her, crouching down below the window sill, while she was changing her chemise.

She filled her lungs with air. They were impossible!

Jan, too. He had his grievances. He told her more than once they made a lot of noise about what they called Benefits. They claimed that they were underpaid and overworked. They thought that they deserved the fleshpots of the pharaohs. They hoped that Jan would hand them all their extras on a silver platter—and some, no doubt, to spare.

They asked for twenty-minute breaks. They kept on whining that Jan was exploiting their labor.

One wore his hair down to his shoulders.

Another flashed a fake gold tooth.

They smelled. And they attracted swarms of flies.

A dish lay broken on their porch for weeks.

In summary, it was impossible to rehabilitate a Donoghue. It was hopeless.

The end result was always this: comparison. Jan's flivver—purring like a tiger. Their sorry vehicles, just wobbling at the touch.

They were the parasites of Mennotown, and tempers would run short when efforts to reform them came to naught—for red was their favorite color.

# Chapter 53

"Red equals beautiful—synonymous words," proclaimed all the Bolshevik poets. No other color was permitted in their gray and wretched country.

Red soldiers sprung up everywhere, like toadstools after rain. Trains overflowed with troops who wore red bands on sleeves and caps. They dangled legs from rooftops painted a bloody red. They rode on buffers draped in crimson flags. Blood-red was the denunciation box set up at the end of each street. Red was the rubber stamp now needed to visit a neighboring town.

Plain everything was Red! Red! Red! And yet still more Red!

Marleen surrendered a single tear: "A countryside that has been ruled by bullets cannot grow grain on soil so soaked with blood—"

She said this to Natasha. The two sat on the crumbling steps of Apanlee, gray in dress and gray of heart, and knew: the Reds had more in mind than just the end of war.

Natasha and Marleen would often sit like that, intent on sharing warmth, preserving energy while plotting for survival, ab-

sorbing the fading rays of the sun. Now worry piled on worry.

The stables were empty; the bandits have taken the horses. The cow that pulled a plow all day could not give milk at supper time. Marleen stared at a crimson poster that flapped in the lame wind.

"The Earth to the Peasants? The sky to the birds?"

"Shhh! Have you lost your mind?" Natasha cast quick glances. Since they were having a defeatist conversation in the open and anyone could listen in, you couldn't be too careful.

"Our Comrade Lenin is the perfect man," announced Natasha in a strident voice, this for the benefit of passersby.

Marleen still clutched her bitterness. "You hate your neighbor? Denounce him. Report his words to the authorities—"

"I know, Marleen. Be quiet!"

Two hungry women, wrinkled both, now sat together, plotting for tomorrow. Their thoughts were bitter gall.

"We're filled with Faith, and may our hollow faces testify," Marleen wrote every week, painstakingly. She had dozens of cousins in Kansas. She knew they were swimming in riches. She kept on writing—letter after letter.

"Why don't they answer back? Could our letters have been lost?"

"I sent them weeks ago," Natasha said, while touching Marleen's cheek. "Maybe next week? We'll manage until then."

Marleen was gnawing on a wormy apple. She still owned four medium potatoes, obtained through a decided miracle. She carefully saved up the peels.

"I cannot imagine what happened. They're family. Were they in our place and we in theirs, would we neglect to speed our help and prayers?"

"There are spies everywhere."

Natasha watched Marleen write missive after missive with trembling, unaccustomed fingers, as food diminished by the day. She did no longer bother masking what she knew—what everybody knew: Once they had eaten their reserve, there was no food

left anymore. None. There was no margin left for hope.

"Please! Please! In our dearest Lord's sweet name—let a large vessel full of wheat speed across the ocean."

Instinctively all turned toward Natasha. "Maybe tomorrow you can go and gather thistles from the field—?"

"—maybe that hen has still an extra egg?"

"—maybe a real surprise is waiting at the barter market?"

"—a neighbor might be willing to share some edibles?"

Natasha's hands moved furtively, begetting the sign of the trustworthy cross. Natasha's raised three hunger-swollen fingers: "Let help come soon, oh Lord," she echoed loyally, though she was Orthodox and hence committed to her saints for timely intervention. "Let it come from America—"

Nobody had explained to her where this mysterious country called America might be that would speed grain on Faith. But she aligned herself with Marleen's Faith; she liked to keep all irons in the fire.

"It can't be otherwise," she said in a low voice, and briefly patted Mimi, a shadow child by then.

The little girl kept chewing on her lip. She was a feline child, starved to a skeleton, already cynical. She asked herself, while small, brief shivers kept tumbling down her spine: what would the Party say? To pray for alms sent by Imperialists was dangerous.

She was seven years of age. She knew the Party rules. To plead for help from overseas Imperialists as if she were a beggar child instead of a proud citizen of Russia, equal to any former nobleman, was treason of the highest order.

A government official had come to Apanlee the week before and taken her by her left hand to ask some pointed questions about the prayerful.

"Now tell me of your brothers," the official said, her spindly fingers in his claw.

"Help will arrive," her brothers said. "Help will come soon,"

her brothers promised, kneeling in daily prayer. "Say amen, Mimi. Please."

"Come with me. We will have to talk alone."

Her eyes grew big, but she went willingly. Since then, her head felt light. The neighbors kept her in the corners of their eyes. By then, she was already training for the future and Comrade Lenin's property, already first in class and up for a promotion.

"Now tell me everything you know."

She hung her head, pretending she were deaf.

The famine took its time. Two raw, wet winters in a row turned crops across the land as black and gummy as tar. The fences, one by one, fell down. The tractors stood in disrepair. Bolts, nuts and screws were missing.

"Some people still trade wheat," Natasha volunteered.

"So try," Marleen said, while giving her free hand.

Piece by piece and box by box, most everything that had survived the looting of the anarchists was bartered away for handfuls of food on the thriving thieves' market. That's where Natasha wrote her rules. Few there matched her bartering skills.

Natasha took the inlaid sewing box that had belonged to Dorothy to trade in for a cup of mildewed flour.

She took the silver-coated cane the cripple used to carry and traded it for seven turnips and three medium potatoes.

She helped the twins trade a good bottom plow for fifteen pounds of wizened beets. They told her, barely audible: "If we get caught, it's chains at state expense."

But feed the cow, or feed the clan? Of course the cow must go. But once the cow was gone, so, too, was the milk for the baby. It kept toppling sideways as it tried to take a few steps.

This was the child, born on the slaughter night. It never smiled, and hardly ever cried.

It knit its brow. It barely stirred. It chewed the air as oldsters do, and swallowed with reluctance. Natasha looked at it and knew, a realist: in olden days, it might have grown. The olden

days were gone.

Still, she fought hard. A baby was a baby.

To live and die, and not a single dimple? The heartbreak of it all!

She did not give up easily. The others in the nearby Russian village jeered at her; she didn't care; she owned an infant once again; she kept on feeding it potato water and dried its diapers by the stove.

She muttered dolefully: "Who pampers you? Who swaddles you? Who bites your teeny toenails?", while salty tears fell on the baby's wrinkled face. She pleaded, feeding it a pallid carrot broth: "Drink just a little bit to please your old Natasha. For if you drink a lot, you little worm, you puny little miserable worm, you pee. And if you pee—why, watch Natasha swat your little bottom and scold you lovingly—"

She chanted to her saints as loudly as she dared—the more obscure a saint, the better she rated her chances. She had found one in whom she still believed—a dusty and neglected saint dug up from underneath old manuscripts in one of Uncle Benny's crates he used to keep behind his shelves to store important thoughts.

Natasha spoiled that saint with her attention day and night, and swathed him with an old handkerchief she had lifted from Marleen. Thereby, she hoped to soften him. She bowed before his sullen countenance. She arched her back as best she could to make him feel important.

"Don't disappoint me now," she told her saint, and shook her bony finger in his face. "Or else, you will not get that extra candle—"

So let him think she still had lots of candles stashed away!

The truth be told: she had a few still left. She used them sparingly. She knew precisely why.

In months to come, she said a lot of tested prayers to that saint. She pleaded first for Yuri, then for Sasha—if strength was left, for Mimi. She told the saint they were the last, those three,

to keep the creed alive, but then she waited for the miracle to come—and when it didn't come, her negligent saint was in for a tough, angry scolding.

She yelled: "You! You! You try to bend my nature!"

All she could see were empty eyes, dumb lips.

Regardless! She took him everywhere. He nestled in her pouch.

Thanks to Natasha's chants, born centuries ago, the infant girl survived two long and bitter years. It survived by the smallest of margins but did not live, regrettably, to grow a single tooth. Natasha kept on dragging it to her own stove where it was dry and warm, but its glance stayed dull; its forehead was damp to the touch—just like the year to come: cold and damp and gray and desperate.

Spring took its time arriving.

Death took its time arriving.

The infant was expected to succumb most any day, right from the start, but it kept struggling on: amazing will in such a tiny body. It lived just long enough to learn to call Natasha's name, until the great Ukrainian famine, after all, came stealthily and hushed it for its grave.

Natasha strapped the little body to a board. She pushed her shoulder underneath and took it to the orchards. "You ought to be ashamed!" she told her dusty saint, and did not speak to him for weeks.

Still, he was credited for helping her endure the queuing lines, where she would start a lot of petty arguments to lessen the pangs of starvation.

Three still remained—the twins and Mimi, not yet a Pioneer but soon, who was shedding teeth belatedly to grow a second set.

While Natasha stood there in the cold blasts of winter wind and shivered, expressing her frustration as loudly as she could, her borderline saint in her pocket, small bits of hope fell on her mind like sparks.

One bleak and drizzly morning, early, Natasha saw a half-grown piglet rooting outside in the mire. Her eyes became two narrow slits. She didn't know whose animal it was—a piglet was a piglet; this here was half a pig.

Natasha took a club and hit it on the head. It shrieked piercingly before it toppled over. Natasha beamed in triumph. She kept on hitting it and hitting it until it was so weak that she could straddle it and dispatch it with a sharp knife.

She took it by its hind legs and dragged it in the shed, then ran to fetch Marleen. "See what I have here! See?"

She helped to scald and scrape the stubble, and when Marleen probed for details as to this wondrous find, Natasha squared her chin and started lying brazenly. "I traded it for something I still had tucked away."

"For what? What did you trade, Natasha?"

"You really want to know?"

"What was it? Tell the truth."

"A pair of boots. That's all."

"You stole them? You're telling me you stole my dear departed husband's boots—"

"Think what you like. What's it to me?"

"Did you not promise me," Marleen was shouting angrily, forgetting for the briefest moment that now Natasha was her equal, "that you would never steal again? Did you not promise me?"

"He who did that, and foolishly," philosophized Natasha, "can also take it back."

*Ach!* Almost like the olden days. Natasha dabbed her eyes.

Because Natasha was Natasha, hence loyal to the core, she did not fully see the brutal sky, the broken earth; she kept her eyes turned inward. Faith brought her to her knees repeatedly. Faith came in waves of hope.

She tricked herself to think her heart was stone—how else could she have borne the knowledge that He, whose very name was Mercy, kept slashing wounds into her heart that time would never heal?

She could decipher but not read, but she hid Marleen's Bible. That hidden Bible, said the twins, was now the key to everything. They claimed it could restore sight to the blind, sound to the deaf; it made the lame walk sprightly and raised the dead from their chill tombs—all that and more, just Faith and yet more Faith. Could Faith not, therefore, feed an eight-year-old as well—her sugar baby, Mimi!—the next to die? Unless help came—and soon?

"Ask, and Ye shall be given—" the twins prayed fervently, while pushing Faith uphill as though it were a boulder. "—are Ye not much better than sparrows?"

"Your turn, Mimi. Please. We're waiting."

"I can't," said Mimi softly, obliged, by government decree, to do away with Faith.

"You must," Natasha ordered, and gave her a soft nudge. "Among us, we don't cry."

Which was much easier said than done. Only yesterday, for instance, Natasha came upon the youngster, sitting huddled in the loft. She thought her heart would crack like glass at what she saw—for there was Mimi, sitting hunched with matted hair and glowing eyes while sucking on a harness strap. Once upon a distant time, that piece of leather had been greased.

"You can depend on me," Natasha told Marleen.

Marleen did not waste extra words. She only said: "I know."

Her shoulders were sloping; her heart was a-flutter; her breath came in gasps and her mind swam in blood—but her grief mattered not, her pain counted not: He who in richer times poured blessings upon blessings could also take them back.

"It's so," Marleen insisted, not tolerating any counter-argument.

For there they sat, two hunger-swollen women, together, side by side, both pondering the glorious Revolution. What had it yielded them?

The snow melt had collapsed Hein's grave, and with it, all ambivalence.

"I know. It's true. Of course." Why argue what was now on everybody's tongue? Natasha shivered and said nothing to challenge Marleen's Faith.

All that was strong and good and clean and sane had turned to dust and ashes. Their country writhed in hunger's claws, in poverty and misery—weeds higher than their shoulders!—this, now, was happiness? Faith grew its iron roots at Apanlee. It grew roots where nothing else grew.

Natasha knew that, for herself, it wasn't Faith that kept her pushing on against the blasted wind—it was, above all, fatalism and persistence, bred into her strong peasant bones by centuries of woe.

So let Marleen depend on Faith to heal herself to where she could draw an easy breath again, not choking on the blinding mass of pain where once her heart had beaten for her children! Natasha counted on her elbows. Faith or no Faith, she used her elbows, too.

She stood in line for days on end and waited for her share. Without a word or order from Marleen, the servant took her place in any queue to help sustain the pious clan—though had she had a choice, she now said to Marleen, enraged with a betrayal she never fully understood, she would as soon be dead.

All this—for Liberty? Fraternity? Equality?

Natasha often rode in open lorries to hustle for edible treasures. She shivered in the wind, but nothing kept her back.

For flour, two days.

For sugar, one night.

For a pair of used boots, as long as a week.

There were long lines at every store, and there Natasha stood, wrapped in Marleen's discarded shawl, and here she pushed, and there she shoved; she was vociferous. She argued expertly and didn't stop shouting until she got her share. No one argued as fiercely as she. That was the margin now by which the clan survived; Natasha's arguments and elbows.

If there was a queue, Natasha stepped in line. She didn't ask

what might be sold or bartered; chances were it might be edible. For days on end she stood, patiently waiting, her feet in the debris the Revolution left behind. She stood there, her mittenless hands in torn pockets, fingering a stolen coin, perhaps a hoarded silver thimble, still hoping for a chance to buy that piece of bread. Aching in muscle and bone, she queued and she shivered, hoping for a heated brick at night to warm her tired feet, while pondering the past, a sad ruin! the present, a sham! and the future?

The future belonged to the people, no argument there!—but to whose good?

Free rides on trains—with windows broken out, upholstery ruined, and thugs and murderers now riding next to her. Free postage stamps—but danger in receiving letters.

Four hapless people had been executed, willy-nilly, deep in some broken orchard, for correspondence with some relatives, suspects of having plotted to undo the gains the Revolution wrought.

Those people, shot for having sabotaged the government, were Germans.

# Chapter 54

The neighbors raised their eyebrows when they heard of Jan's plan to give a helping hand to the scoundrels running roughshod over Russia, but most agreed: Jan was enormously successful; he could do as he pleased. At testimonial dinners, it was an honor to sit next to him. Besides, there was no rush. He might yet change his mind. Jan had agreed to teach Men's Bible Class, with schedules well past Christmas. And Josie had her troubles; she wasn't well; her stockings were still sagging.

Despite her former Red Cross job that might have speeded paperwork—for through her former friendship with the Finkelsteins she had connections that would have helped Jan's travel papers past every rubber stamp—Josie was still lethargic and subdued and, hence, of little use. Her hectic energy of yore had never quite come back.

That's where things stood.

As it turned out, to get those harvesters to Russia turned out to be a bureaucratic nightmare. It was no wonder, therefore, that Russia became a low priority, though Lizzy moaned and fussed.

"Look, if they really needed help, they'd write and tell you

so. Don't you agree?" said Little Melly, deftly weaning Lizzy from her apprehensions.

Now that the war was over, finally, the world was turning back to normalcy, as she would tell her neighbors. And high time, too. It was as Dewey said: "Our own community is battling with the weeds."

"Street order has to be restored," said Dewey Epp. "Or else the rabble wins."

The Donoghues grew ever more rambunctious, and it was time to put some distance between them and proper Christians. Why bother with the Russians? The town had its concerns. The bullies had returned. They were out in the streets, carousing at all hours. And Archibald, albeit grown by then into a gangly youth—though not yet shaving properly—still bore the brunt of taunts. He turned up black and blue. It was high time for Mennotown to blow the whistle on the wicked. There was no other way. That was her battle cry.

"Until we have those fire trucks and funds to staff them properly to reinforce the curfew, we have no business raising funds for Russia—"

That's where her preacher brother's gospeling came in. She was ashamed to have uncharitable feelings, but truth was truth, and she must speak the truth—the more that money was drained off for Russia, the less the coins dropped into the donation trays the ushers passed around.

As Little Melly tidied up her cluttered drawers, so Dewey tidied up his flock. He drew up a checklist of hazards.

*The Perils of Pauline.* Houdini and his sorceries. Transparent sleeves. Round robin letters. Fire crackers. Flush commodes—particularly flush commodes!

"No need to dress up nature," decided Dewey firmly; he spoke for everyone.

By then, most folks were used to electricity and even elevators, but water toilets down the hall from where you breakfasted were something else again. A certain Unitarian, who had in-

stalled one such device, would go so far as to stand back, pull the string, and glory in the gurgle.

"And don't forget the dance bug. Hear?" admonished Little Melly, close by her brother's elbow.

"I won't. I won't. That's where I draw the line."

When it came to the dance bug, the Elder Dewey and his deacons stood united. Episcopalians were jitterbugging openly; no doubt the Methodists were not that far behind. One-two-three-hop! One-two-three-hop! Couples vaulted, leaped, pranced and gasped. It was the height of decadence. Some even danced the polka. All danced the Bunny Hug. The Grizzly Bear. The Turkey Trot. The Crab Step. The Kangaroo Dip. The Chicken Scratch. The music never stopped.

Broad was the road to hell!

"Those trucks are critical," the spinster therefore said to Josie, whose actions were no longer frivolous. "What if Jan has a fire at the mill? The union folks are restive."

"If you say so," said Josie listlessly.

Her mind was far away. She seemed bereft of feelings. A gossip once observed her walking in her nightgown in the moonlight while talking to herself.

Little Melly watched all that, while acting blustery. Her heart was singing like a nightingale; she had already given it to Jesus, but somehow, social energy remained. Things were progressing nicely. She often had to hum herself a soothing hymn to keep herself in check, for Jan would sit out on her porch each Thursday evening, surrounded by the Fire Truck Committee, to plan his ways and means.

"Any day now. Any day—" giggled Little Melly coyly, leaving open what she meant.

Not only did she giggle more than ever, these days she even laughed out loud. When she would hear an oft-repeated flivver joke of Jan's, she laughed as hard the seventh time around as she had done the first. And when she intercepted yet another missive out of Russia that made her think that someone tried to inter-

fere with getting those much-needed fire trucks, and planted herself on the evidence—why, nobody asked her to move!

Still, folks did not give up. People kept nagging Dewey about the folks at Apanlee. Some of them were peskier than the worst Jehovah's Witnesses whenever Apanlee came up, and that included Lizzy.

"Our folks back home might need a hand from us" fussed Lizzy, nagging Dewey morning, noon, and night to make sure Uncle Benny was all right.

The Elder Dewey wanted to forget.

"Sure. Sure. Why not?" he stalled. "Say, what about the bake sale? Have all the ladies signed? We need their contribution, too, to get those fire trucks. By nine o'clock, the town lights should be out."

Dewey had it from firm sources that the new government in Russia was to the left of everything. Himself a staunch Republican, he made sure that his deacons voted likewise. The Russians were the least of his concerns, what with the creeping unions.

"So let them now enjoy their workers' paradise!" was Dewey's point of view. Politically, things could be called fishy in Russia.

His sister quickly backed him up. "Right. Right you are. Some people never learn."

She felt no loyalty and, hence, no obligation. She had been small when she left Apanlee; her memories were faded. She had no use for Apanlee. None whatsoever. None. America was now her country. She called herself an isolationist, like everybody else.

Old Lizzy looked as though she hemorrhaged inside when she heard talk of corpses piled around the Kremlin. Little Melly had sturdier emotions.

"Don't pay attention. Hear? You can't believe the scribblers. Such stories are always dressed up in the press."

"Perhaps a bit, but even so—" said Lizzy timidly, but in her nimble way, the spinster cut her off.

"One's charity begins at home," decided Little Melly firmly.

"Unless we get those fire trucks, the Donoghues are bound to overthrow morality and decency. And then what? Well? Say! Have you ever thought of what the consequence would be?"

"But don't we owe—"

"Those fire trucks are critical. And I mean critical."

"Has Uncle Benny written lately?"

"Not since the Middle Ages. Remember how he used to write five pages to explain a single word."

"But what if something happened?" cried Lizzy, giving way to panic.

"God, no! It couldn't be! Who would touch him? He never harmed a beetle. Don't you agree he'd write to Josephine and ask for her assistance? He would. He would set pride aside. Those two were thicker 'n thieves."

"That's true. You're right."

"Of course I am. I'm sure that everything is fine."

"You're positive?"

"I'm positive. Now, settle back and take a little nap. You'll wake up quite refreshed."

Thus Lizzy shelved her fears. Besides, there was the fair. The country fair was in full swing again, and Lizzy's cows, still nurtured on the principles of Apanlee, were as acclaimed as ever. She knew every cow and calf by name. She didn't care if people smiled; the buckets that she carried all the way from Apanlee, now almost half a century ago, still gave her ample status.

The weather turned balmy. Then hot. And then chill. The bells kept on pealing. Seasons revolved, as always, around the wondrous holidays.

Spring came again and left, then June, July and August.

September arrived. Next in line was Halloween.

When an aggressive Baptist minister took ill, the Elder Dewey filled his shoes admirably and finished off the pumpkins.

The postwar flu had ravished many families and left young children needing mothering. Little Melly, to her relatives' delight, received three serious offers of marriage.

Little Melly was flattered and charmed. She practically threw

off sparks. But all the same, she coyly shooed each suitor from her door the way she shooed the tomcats—her life held sufficient excitement.

"Look at my hens," she pointed out with several pearly giggles. "They keep on laying eggs without the benefit of roosters." She saw no need for matrimony at this point in her own earthly voyage. She might have, in her younger years, but certainly not now. Her hips kept spreading; her gout gave her trouble. She had her starched, white curtains; she had her potted plants.

To round out this brief life in preparation for the next, she had begun to minister to several shut-ins, a dwarf, and two blind diabetics. These causes put lumps in her throat.

"No need to be someone I was not meant to be," she pointed out, her eyes on Archibald, who was her pride and joy. She still trimmed his hair with the help of a dish pan. In church, they hit high notes together.

Archie proved a moral challenge, seeming romantically delayed, but she was up to it. First she smacked him, then she petted him to help him grow into another trusted citizen America would need.

Of all of Dewey's children Little Melly raised, Archie was her favorite. She had high hopes for him. While Dewey clattered round the country in his flivver as eagerly as ever to track down sliding sinners, she sat amid her pillows tranquil, plump and plain and pious and content, and with no need to burden her imagination with anything except the Second Coming of the Lord.

She nursed a private fantasy. She did not tell a soul. She would not even tell her preacher brother, but she often dreamed of what it would be like when Jesus finally appeared. She was His bride; that was the grand design; she hoped to see Him first. She counted on His Coming.

No one, of course, could foretell His arrival—she didn't even try. But she could dream, and dream she did: before she fell asleep each night, she toyed with variations of her favorite dream that made her feel as though she had taken a shower with plenty of suds and hot water.

Her visions made her feel scrubbed clean. They made her

feel relaxed. She knew that it was vain and probably heretical to want to know the date—so as to be prepared!—but still, she hoped against all hope He would announce His visit to her privately. She ached to show off her town—the joy and the sparkle of Kansas. She hoped there would be time to have the main road sprinkled. To settle all that union dust, mused Little Melly, caught dreamily in that delicious interim right between wakefulness and sleep, one needed fire trucks.

The new acoustics Dewey had requested so as to bind the Devil with his zeal had cost a fortune and a dime—but every dime was carefully inspected and well spent. Now, Dewey relished his new voice in his expanded church—it bounced from beam to beam as he called sinners to conversion, undercutting the rapacious gains the Baptists and the Methodists amassed.

The folks were pleased, but even so—the church funds had been drained. Three hefty notes were still unpaid, and Jan still talked of shipping harvesters to Russia, and called for volunteers to help him raise the money.

Though Dewey was a trusted expert at turning conscience into cash, he and his deacons huddled weekly. He worried at his church's monetary pinch. There was an upper limit to what people were willing to give to the needy. The Elder Dewey knew that if he crossed the safety line between glad nickeling and risky quartering, the members of his flock would become quarrelsome. And if he pushed them into dollaring, they all tensed up, like Lizzy's cows, with too many hands on their udders.

"The *Rooshian* brethren curse their lives, no doubt," he preached repeatedly, so that there was no doubt where he stood—fair-square with Mennotown and its own social needs. "They must have sinned, however. Now let us pray to do what's right by our own folks at home, so that we learn humility. So we don't follow Russia."

The congregation shuffled restlessly. Most people scratched their heads.

Still, Jan spoke up, his own brow furrowed with ambivalence, and Doctorjay backed him at every meeting, his nose getting red-

der and redder.

"They are our kin. They might be in serious straits."

The Mennotowners, house by house, palavered their responsibilities at length. It was decided at long last to send a scouting expedition, as in the olden days, to find out what was what. The plan was to find out, once and for all, so there could be no doubt, what improvements, if any, the Red Revolution had wrought.

That happened the following fall. The church fathers met after services. They met in the augmented basement where Dewey had, by then, installed a row of built-in kitchen cabinets, the newest rage, to please his volunteers. He still had plans to renovate the sanctuary—an elevated platform for the choir, a gleaming basin, to the left, for baptisms.

"A pie is a pie; it goes only so far," argued Dewey adroitly, while dusting off the abacus.

It was incomprehensible in any case to think of Apanlee as needing their assistance—in every oldster's memory, a place blessed gate-to-gate, and wall-to-wall, with riches beyond words.

"Of course we'll help. Why not? But first things first. Let's finish what we started. Let's clean up our own yard."

The issue boiled down to two choices: to have a huge spaghetti feed to raise enough hard cash to ship those harvesters across the great Atlantic and all the way to Apanlee—a place now shrouded in a fog of godlessness, if you believed the rumors!—or to buy fire trucks to bring some law and order back to town.

"I'll check into the Apanlee matter. I'll do so as soon as I can. I'll have my sister pack my cardboard suitcase, in the meantime. As soon as I am getting used to my new spectacles, I'll volunteer to be His eyes and ears."

"But don't you think—"

"As early as next year," said Dewey Epp, and changed the subject deftly.

It was hard to sustain the momentum. The fire trucks won out.

# Chapter 55

There had been murderous famines before, leaving both peasants and gentry exhausted, but nothing compared to this famine! Not within the oldest peasant's living memory had there been ever such a want, such utter desolation.

Life emptied out. It was as if the world had ended. The length and width of the Ukraine, those who still clung to life were eating grass and roots.

Bleak days and bleaker nights—and scores of ashen villages.

It was as if a hand had wiped a chalk board clean; it was as if the locusts came and stripped the fields and left bare earth and nothing else. Now it was springtime once again; but where was the seed, and where were the workers? The torrents of blood had abated, but where was hope for betterment—or food?

Natasha lifted a weak hand.

"In olden days," she told the twins, "a peasant would elect to starve to death before eating the seed set aside for the following year—"

Had it not been for them, those two, still clinging to the brink, tomorrow would have died. Two hardy striplings in the olden

days but now two rattling shadows, the twins had grown into their meager manhood as hunger struck with virulence and it appeared that what the anarchists had failed to do, starvation would—lure those two to the grave.

"Why two of us?" they asked, in voices barely audible.

The twins chafed like two mules. They had failed once. If tested one more time, they would not be found wanting. The Lord had turned His gaze on them; they didn't know what lay in wait to test their Faith in Him, but this they knew: before them, a relentless mandate.

"Be it His will," said Yuri, "to send us either calm or storm."

His prayers, still in German, were benchmarks of grit and endurance. The famine stalked him like a wolf, teeth bared and fangs exposed, but all the same, there was still Faith—the kind of Faith that reaches for the Gospel, blinded, as for an elixir as sweet and overpowering as sleep.

"He walks forever by our side," said Sasha, too. Between him and eternity stood Faith. He whispered, barely audible: "He will provide. I know this for a fact."

By then, the faithful did not even have the luxury to speak of Him by name, for several people had been shot at dawn for having done just that. The twins, however, trusted Faith, for nothing else was left. They trusted Faith as though it were their father's *bashlik*—the sheepskin Hein had worn in his own youth with careless nonchalance to keep his burly body toasted happily while, outside, blizzards howled and peasants yelped with cold.

"—we'll suffer not in vain—"

"—He'll spread a cloud for covering—"

Across the dried-out fields flew tumbleweeds. The gusts of wind kept licking at their cheeks with dry, persistent tongues.

They still had this: a trunk, the width of a small apple crate, filled to the rim with seed, the safety valve between a miserable existence and the grave.

"The government—" Marleen tried speaking, and let the sentence drop.

"Shhh. Hush!" Natasha was saving her strength. It was not

wise to speak with disrespect of leadership, but though she was so weak that she could barely stand, she had strength left to spit against the wind, and why not do that now? Her thoughts curled like poisonous smoke. She razed the fields for roots; sometimes she hunted down a rodent. That bought another day.

The government? The government had done away with the official gallows, only to unleash the terror in the streets. The terror ran its course; the land no longer crawled with anarchists; the dregs of war lay dying in the hedges of causes not recorded. Each day, the corpse cart came and threw the corpses on the lorry.

Marleen spoke up. "Hein used to say: 'A beggar is a messenger from God.'"

"The olden days," Natasha said, "are gone."

Still, duty sat on Marleen's tongue. "Hein used to say: 'If you are asked to share, you share. It will come back to you tenfold.'"

Natasha gazed into Marleen's dull eyes reproachfully. "Don't be a fool. Quick! Lock the gates! Don't be a mollycoddle, you! Be sensible. What's there to share? There's nothing left to share."

She stuck by her own instincts. So let a beggar die! A beggar was a beggar—a nuisance, and no more. That was Natasha's point of view. She shared it often with Marleen—in fact, at every opportunity.

Natasha started ordering Marleen about as though she had no *umlaut.* She barricaded every window, every door. She saw the vermin crawling on the beggars' collars. "Just go away! You hear? *Davai! Davai!* Away!"

"Please. Anything."

"No. Go away. Why don't you go away?" She knew of the diseases they would bring. Spotted fever. Typhoid. Cholera. "Now scat! I told you! Go away!"

The larder was empty. The cupboards lay bare. And through the crumbling gates of Apanlee still poured the ghosts of yesterday as famine emptied Lenin Square and Trotsky Street, and more arrived, and more—a torrent of the starving—as hunger emptied

cities and drove the people to the land, as famine emptied every hut and factory and sent the hungry masses out into the countryside to grub the earth for food.

These human ruins with wan faces, hollow eyes, swollen hands, were tapping on Marleen's masked bedroom window. At Apanlee, they claimed, there still was golden bread.

In the ditches they sat, by the mulberry trees, their feet wrapped in the slogans of tomorrow. "Just a morsel," they pleaded. "Just half a crust, maybe?"

Natasha never faltered for a moment. "Go away!" she shouted angrily and swung her reedy broom, but they would not; wild rumors glued their hollow faces to her panes.

Natasha made a fist repeatedly and shook it at the beggars. She hollered, and she cursed. "There is no food. No food at all. Why don't you go away?"

She watched them move into the shelter of the hedges, where they would sit, sometimes behind the empty chicken shed, nursing ugly frost bite that exploded on their toes, waiting for a change of heart, waiting for something to happen. String parcels in their hands, they held out a few meager possessions for barter: nails, matches, thread, perhaps a comb, a handkerchief.

Natasha shouted until she was hoarse: "The olden days are gone!"

From prayer to prayer, the twins learned their lesson—that there was yet significance in suffering the likes of which a monster might dream up. They were cowards, they knew—when the anarchists came, they should have fought back. Instead, they had hid in a chimney.

When they emerged at dawn, the Lord's Prayer on blue lips, and found the earth thick with the ancient martyr blood that ran in their own veins, they knelt and solemnly committed to a life of sacrifice for any test, for any task the Lord would set before them.

That's why they asked right from the start, two stubborn look-alikes: "No food. Why two of us?"

To that, there was no answer. They learned that life did not

snap easily. The orchards still had apples.

Their hands soon were covered with blisters. They chafed from dawn to dusk. They pulled the plow, large ropes tied several times around their shoulders. Soaked through with rain and shivering with cold as rain turned into sleet, they tried to plow the acres to bury the last winter wheat before the storms arrived.

"—why two of us?" they panted. They worked like beasts to pull the blade to feed themselves, their mother, Mimi, and finally Natasha.

"Thank God there's two of you," Natasha said, for she had eyes; she saw that hunger had so weakened them that one would not have had the strength to pull the blade that cut the earth alone.

Soon the October winds were whining through the gaping holes of Apanlee. Another spring arrived and left, and summer came and went. Marleen stared at Natasha. Her eyes were dry and burning.

"I found a pair of Hein's old spectacles," Natasha said at last. "I'll trade them for a dozen fat potatoes."

Natasha nudged Marleen in hopes of coaxing a small smile—four small potatoes, at the most. Natasha liked to boast. In the old days, Marleen would have been jolted. There would have been some cuffs. The old days were no more.

Marleen responded listlessly. "Do that. Why not? It cannot hurt to try."

"I'll try. You know that I can argue heartily—" Natasha nudged Marleen a bit more forcefully. The bartering in the old days—the energy it gave!

Marleen sat silently. She was so weak she couldn't cross her legs. "God preserve you. God preserve you. If we manage to live through the year—"

"I'll go and gather thistles. We'll grind them up, and mix them with potato peels—"

"All right. Here's a canister."

Natasha gathered thistles. Marleen ground them up and mixed in the potato peels. Which made ten crumbling cookies. Which

bought another day.

Many died, but some survived. A ghastly winter followed. The wind howled through the broken chimney. Next came a rain-clogged spring. The mound that held the dead of Apanlee became a muddy cavity. Outside, the dead lay on the frozen ground and in the melting snow. The village street grew empty; the corpse cart came and went—and still a few lived on.

Those who survived ate fish heads and potato peels, and that's how they survived. They ate such weeds as cows eat and survived. If need be, they ate mice, rats, ants, and earthworms—and survived. Those who survived lived on because they willed survival. Not many, but some did.

The story is told of Larissa.

Larissa survived—a distant cousin from an obscure branch of relatives who, in the landless days, had sought a fortune in the east and settled in Sagradovka. One wind-blown day, the twelve-year-old arrived at Apanlee as if pulled there by a powerful magnet.

The twins stared at the visitor. "How did you know how to find us? Apanlee is not on any map."

"Nobody knows. Nobody knows—"

The young girl was foot-sore and gaunt. Her skinny legs were trembling with exhaustion.

The twins sprang to her aid. Natasha scurried for a heated brick. Marleen found an old blanket with which to wrap the relative.

"I walked on wooden clogs," Larissa said in a low voice, "while eating dandelions, burdock, bluebells, willow roots and nettles, and that's how I survived—"

"Here! Here, sit down—"

"I picked my way across the dead. Where I collapsed, I slept. I rode a train until that train stopped running—"

A story emerged, by and by. It took many months to complete it.

"I just walked on and on—" Larissa said repeatedly. "What could I do? I walked—"

The cold rains fell on her; the stars above recoiled; the woods stood dark and shadowy. Raw courage and defiance, bred there by centuries of hardened forebears, drove Larissa on.

"I walked," she said. "I am telling the unvarnished truth—"

She said she walked on wet, then icy cobble stones, through pelting rain, through freezing sleet, hands buried deeply in her pockets. "I walked," she said, still speaking in a monotone, "into the melt of yet another spring—" A raw will drove Larissa.

"I picked my way across the dead," Larissa said, oblivious to release.

She sat there in the kitchen, by the oven, very straight and very still, just staring at her folded hands. Not since the days before the Revolution had there been anyone so mannerly.

"Faith drove you," said the twins.

"Somebody," said Larissa softly, "would hand me, now and then, a piece of wet, black bread—"

"Your prayers, surely, made the difference?"

She did not echo that, but neither did she differ. "I walked. What could I do? I walked. The sun's rays grew thinner and thinner—"

Hunched hard against the coming winter—across the frozen land, through howling blizzards, on and on, into a second spring, a third—that's how Larissa walked.

Luck, said Larissa softly, next led her to a workers' dormitory. That's where she found a cot. "I stayed there through the coldest days. When it turned warm again, I walked—"

She kept on talking, softly, recounting how she begged her sustenance from passing trains while walking on and on, past the untidy heaps of frozen bodies, her skin a dusty gray that folded into many creases.

"One day, I bit into a naked sparrow," Larissa told them, twitching. "I felt it moving in my mouth—"

"On wings of prayer, surely—"

And when the thaw set in again, Larissa said, she walked again: across a land now bristling with barbed wire. Her skin erupted. Festering sores formed on her heels.

"I walked and walked," she said. It seemed she could not say another sentence.

"The Lord brought you to us," said Yuri. His voice was husky with emotion.

She stood, her shoulders bowed, in the dilapidated halls of Apanlee, her mind filled with the knowledge of the dead who had lain everywhere, stacked up in piles, like wood. She spoke so softly they could barely hear. "Why me? Why two of you?"

A hush fell over the twins in the gathering dusk. Larissa stood, wasted, before them. Their glances met and locked. The instinct of a hiving bee—that was what drove Larissa.

No one ever came to claim Larissa. She simply stayed at Apanlee and no one said a word. She huddled by the stove and kept the fire going with dry leaves, sticks, straw, and underbrush while snowy gusts of wind kept rattling the rafters.

For weeks on end, Larissa's memories would keep her shivering as if there were no warmth in her at all, and finally, she wept. The slightest effort caused fatigue and nausea.

"It felt like an ax," she said in the end. "Just parting my head from my body." That's how she cut clean to the bone.

Yuri and Sascha heard that with relief. They kept their Bible hidden in the straw. They pulled it out for her. Her heart was pounding like a hammer. She kept on pushing it aside. She would have none of that. She sat and rocked and shivered, but finally a story fell in bits and pieces from her lips. The day came when she said: "Somebody pushed me through a window. There was a dugout in the garden, and that is where I hid."

"Your father? Your mother?"

"Dead. Dead."

"Your brothers?"

"I saw them fall and not get up again."

"Your sisters?"

"Four. Four sisters. Raped and bayoneted." Larissa rubbed the pearls of perspiration from her forehead with her sleeve. "What could I do? I walked."

The twins did not give up. "He washed away your sins like footprints in wet sand."

"There's two of them. There's still a chance," Natasha said, and hobbled painfully.

# Chapter 56

The war had helped Jan make a paper fortune from what he called his airship stocks, with Doctorjay hard on his heels, although the latter didn't trust the usurers who still swarmed about Josie.

Doctorjay fancied nickeling. He kept his savings, wisely, in a can. When one filled with coins, he found another.

A tooth no longer cost a quarter; the price went up to fifty cents; Doctorjay kept stashing cans filled to the brim, on which he would fall back in case of rainy days. His Ready Relief now sold wholesale; his herbal business was brisker than ever. His acreage stretched past Hillsboro, all of it free and clear.

"You can't stay behind. You must keep ahead of inflation," boomed the bewhiskered Doctorjay, his Low German accent thicker than ever.

Now that the kaiser was no longer everybody's favorite punching bag, he knew Jan was renewing hope to ship those harvesters. Fat chance he would succeed!

While Jan was still entangled with the bureaucrats and their shenanigans—the sermonizers of the president in Washington

insisting wordily in reams of clever but confusing rhetoric that Russia was sorting itself out as to the kind of democratic government it wanted and deserved!—wheat stood at seventy cents a bushel, and Jan held onto several shipments in hopes for even higher gain.

Jan struggled through enormous paperwork to get those tractors shipped, but it was red tape fore and aft. There was no way, Jan finally admitted, to get equipment overseas to Apanlee.

All that his efforts netted him was just a shoe box full of bills, now gathering both dust and interest, while fifteen tractors stood there, waiting to be shipped.

"Why not just pay for them? Be done with it?" asked Lizzy. Her lips compressed, that's how she sat and watched how Jan conducted business Hebrew-fashion. Every time a bill was left unpaid, she heard her heartbeat hammer with foreboding.

"There are enormous tax advantages to doing business on credit," Jan tried to ease her mind.

"We never sanctioned debt."

"Look, Mom. I'm watching it. If I don't borrow now, I drive my taxes up. Machinery is property, to be used for collateral."

That, too, was new. It made no sense at all. The government taxed diligence and punished thriftiness. The more a farmer worked and earned, the more the government knelt on his spine and tried to weaken it.

She summoned every ounce of courage. "I don't like buying things on time. It's wrong. It says so in the Bible."

"Don't worry, Mom. I'm careful. I had to buy the harvesters. I could not let that kind of bargain pass me by."

A frightening amount, by all accounts, thought Lizzy anxiously, her shy glance on Jan's whitened temples. Was this her son who, in the olden days, would have been anxious and alarmed if Lizzy owed a quarter to the grocer?

She tried to hide her worry beads but couldn't help herself; she kept on venting her opinions. "This Russian tractor business does more credit to your heart than to your head," is how she summed it up. Her son had cash on hand. He had a checkbook,

balanced. There was no need to yield to usury, while interest piled on interest.

How she despised the word!

Some people started hinting that Jan should run for governor, because he had a noble heart to go with fat pockets and a benevolent spirit. For quite some time, he even entertained the thought.

"How would you like me to involve myself in politics?" Jan queried his wan wife.

He was teasing, of course, but she cracked no smile; she just sat and inspected the tips of her shoes. Both knew he was only half-serious. To take on politics would have cost Jan his harvests. He still worked the land, and his grain spikes were sharper than ever.

"There's nothing that you couldn't do," she said to him, obediently, but then forgot the matter. She was too numb to bother. In effect, she agreed that the Rotary Club was designed for the male of the species.

Jan was so taken with his matrimonial truce, his systematically upgraded flivver, and his precocious baby boy he just about perfumed his beard. He let the toddler sniff the flivver fumes until the little fellow all but swooned.

That made the town folks laugh. "Is that a boy, or what? That is no ordinary child. Are you taking him hunting and fishing?"

Jan smiled a pensive smile. He let the challenge pass. The boy-child was sedate and pretty; as quiet and pleasing as the breeze. Jan did not nuzzle his soft neck unless he was clean-shaven. And Josie, too; she cherished him; she plain outdid herself; she treated her small son with reverence and awe. If there was joy at all in Josie's curtailed life, it was joy in the smallest of doodles.

Before the little fellow even learned to speak, she knelt in front of him so that their eyes were level: "Did you do that? All by yourself? That is just beautiful!"

It was soon clear to all that Rarey, true to parentage, was a decided prodigy. Never once did little Rarey, still teething on his silver ring, chew on his fingertips like normal youngsters might.

"The little fellow tidied up your life, correct?" said Dewey, genuinely pleased, and slapped both Jan and Josie on their shoulders.

"He did. He did," said Jan, while Josie merely sagged.

Still, there was Apanlee. The topic dragged through meeting after meeting. Jan might as well have tried to hurry up a snail, though Dewey said repeatedly that he would go and see, if for no other reason than on account of Noralee.

"My sainted mother would have wanted that," he told the congregation while passing the collection plate to save up for the passage. "She would have said, had she been still alive: 'You help when you can. While you can. Without neglecting your hen house, of course.'"

The congregation hushed with reverence. Those words were vintage Noralee. The neighbors all missed Noralee, now safely gathered to her fathers. Just as the war was winding down, she had developed water in her lungs. Doctorjay, who had made light of her complaints and thought it was the foreign flu and, hence, a harmless ailment, learned to eat every word.

The day came when she shouted suddenly: "If you don't pay attention to your wedded spouse, I will just have to die, that's all!"

He refused to believe it, however. "You look rosy and fleshy and fit."

She sent for her children to warn them.

They chuckled and patted her hand.

Therefore, she seized the matter by the collar and carried out her threat. She up and died, triumphing over everyone, including Doctorjay who, in the end, came running. That's how she lived and died, with zest and spice and drama, and never out of character.

The congregation carried her to her eternal rest through sheets of drifting snow.

"*Von der Eh-he-herde reiß mich loß,*" sang the shivering funeral singers.

The coffin was lowered. Noralee sank away, out of sight, as dressed up as the unfortunate *Titanic*. The shovel brigades started shoveling. Most of the mourners wept.

"Could she have only seen herself," said Doctorjay a few hours afterwards while thawing out in Lizzy's toasty kitchen, his red nose full of tears, "she would have been so pleased!"

"You were the best of husbands. You gave her every honor."

"I tried." His sniffles were luxuriant. He had done well by her; he even underlined his love for her by ordering the most expensive coffin he could find—with ribbons, laces, paper flowers. That was the least the Lutheran could do for Noralee—the lusty deacon's widow who gladly snuggled up to him, no matter what the season.

For quite a while, he grieved and wept, well-anchored in the knowledge that his beloved Noralee would rise to heaven without blemish when the Lord's trumpets blew. He looked enormously distressed—and then, before the decade ran its course, he up and married Abigail, who was a heartless flirt.

With Noralee, the sturdiest link to Russia was gone in that branch of the family. Except for Doctorjay, voluptuously teeter-tottering between temptation and restraint, no one was left in Little Melly's home who could remember Apanlee and, therefore, neither she nor Dewey felt as pressured any more about the tiresome refrain of living up to Old World sentiment right under their own roof. Old Lizzy barely counted; her years of youth were shadowy. By then, the tooth of time had gnawed most every memory.

That left the house across the street, where Josie sat and stared.

Would knowing of those letters from the wilds of Russia that Little Melly kept, padlocked beneath her bed, restore her to her old, defiant ways?

Could be. Though hard to say.

For now, she was still docile. The pall on Josie's life did not

lift. The neighbors hardly noticed her, she was that quiet and meek. She sat beside the stove, her shoelaces loose, her blouse hanging out of her skirt. All her torrential energy was gone. The chip on her shoulder was gone. The mad dash to Wichita—gone!

When, in the end, the Elder Dewey volunteered to go to Russia as soon as the siding was stripped and repainted—maybe take Archibald along and teach him by example precisely how to witness for the Lord in heathenland—the Kansas farmers were relieved. Far better it be Dewey than Jan Neufeld—or, worse yet, Josephine! The last thing anybody needed was for Jan's wife to snap out of melancholia and jump back in the liberal ring. From sad experience, the neighbors knew how quickly Josephine, when at her fiery best, could throw a monkey wrench into the city plans to reinforce the curfew for the Donoghues, who still gave Mennotown scarcely a moment's peace.

The mischief-causing Donoghues still agitated at the bottom of the heap, while nursing their leftist ideas. The folks of Mennotown thus took each other's measure and found themselves in full agreement before they left in single file to take their Sunday naps: there was no rush at all. If you inspected any map and saw that Russia was a country larger than America—now sprawling half across the European continent and spilling into Asia!—why pull the fools out of their self-created hole?

When Josie started writing, finally, to find out for herself just what was going on at Apanlee, her letters all came back.

They grew into a little pile. She held them all together with a little rubber band.

But there was hope for her. She was well on the road to betterment. As per Old Lizzy's last report, her taste was back, her sleeplessness was treated intermittently with garlic milk, and she no longer burned her food. Best yet, no longer did she take herself to Wichita with Abigail in tow—the two of them in hat and gloves, with deviltry in mind.

That town was Babylon!

In Wichita, there now was dancing every night; some of the

seedier places even sported colored waiters. In olden days, Josie would just have fetched her parasol and gone to check the action. Not now. Those days were gone; the olden days were gone. She was learning to carve up the turkey in the time-tested Thanksgiving manner.

One odd, disturbing letter slipped by the spinster's vigilance and fell into Josie's hands by accident, bearing no signature but hinting that Russia was hungry, exhausted; that people were tortured with fear. It was a letter oddly sapless—containing lofty words that spoke of Russia on the mend thanks to the brilliance of its leader, Comrade Lenin, It was a missive, Josie sensed, concealing hidden howls that issued from a sinkhole. It made no sense at all. The stamp was two years old.

She tried to compose a reply, but her body grew weary; her eyelids were lead; her words turned into marbles that rolled away from her.

"As soon as I feel well again," said Josie, resting her spine on the spine of a chair, "I will check up on them."

She made up her mind to do what the letter was asking, but then she forgot what it was. She felt relieved and grateful when Little Melly took the letter gently from her lap and let it slide into her apron.

"Look. It's a fake," said Little Melly, softly. "It isn't Uncle Benny's hand. Somebody's tricking you. If there were something wrong with Apanlee, he'd write and tell you that."

"But what if—"

"Just don't you vex your feelings, dear. Just try to heal yourself."

"But don't you think—"

"First, try to heal your wounded spirit. You have not yet bounced back on your feet."

Josie the pen woman, infected with liberal thought, was Josie the invalid now. At the slightest toil and trouble, she took to her cushions, still pale and wan, and there she would lie—quilt over her ears!—refusing to come greet the neighbors.

"Another year," the doctors promised Jan. "This time of life is hard on every woman—" When an imported doctor finally arrived to remedy the situation, he took one look and narrowed down his forecast:

"Familial melancholia."

Just like her *papa*, people said. Remember the madman, Claas Epp?

What was most striking were her silences. Known as a witty talker in her youth, she had run out of words. She had covered her fire with ashes.

She forgot she supported a marginal Wichita poet. She lay in her bed or sat on her couch and said nothing. For years, there was a leaden cast to her that only lifted now and then when she looked at her youngest offspring, Rarey, with the eyes of a slightly mad cat.

Had it not been for Rarey and his astounding talent, she might have slipped away into her inner world entirely. This lastling did something to Josie. He was the thread that bound her to this world. Her love name for him was still Rarey. It was as if she had passed on her icy flame to him. She spoke to him in code.

"It is all humbug anyway," she told the little fellow. "To me, the mind is all."

And Rarey proved to be the wonder of his age. As he shed all his baby dimples and turned into a pleasant toddler, she developed a fierce, focused joy in the smallest of scribbles he made, while his father became more reserved.

Some people were fond of fooling themselves, but not Jan and Josie; that was not in them. The life they shared with one another was now as somber and as satisfying as a funeral feast—the pillage of time did the rest.

And yet: the moon was still full; the breeze was still gentle; and fragrant were the blossoms of each season. Those two were not a matrimonial couple any more, in the strict Gospel sense, but yet, between them, they had Rarey whom they loved equally, who showed an early calling.

As he grew up, he painted in oils. He won one award. Then another. Soon, Josie had a wall full of plaques. Her son's artistic talent became the talk of Mennotown.

Jan grew more faithful in his visits to his church, where Little Melly led the choir as though her heart were bursting with accumulated sentiment. Most of the time, Jan came alone; on rare occasions, he brought Josie. Before the sermon ran its course, his arm supported her.

The word was now on every tongue: the Lord had silenced her.

She was so strange! Her tongue was strange, her manners strange. The look in her cat's eyes was strange. She kept an hour glass beside her bed and, pensively, from time to time, she turned it over and watched the sand grains settle in a pile.

*"Ach ja!"* the neighbors said.

Her violent rebellion had burned itself out. Her arguments no longer struck a nerve in Mennotown. The hiss the length of Mennotown was gone!

Jan cultivated Faith. He frequented devotions at least three times a week. He came and sat, surrounded by his daughters, holding his newest grandchild gently in his lap. At night, he read the Gospel to himself, snow having settled permanently at the temples, turning page after page of the Gospel with stiffening hands.

Just what it was he hunted for, not even Lizzy knew. It used to puzzle her. She couldn't help herself.

"Why add—or worse, subtract?"

The glow of Lizzy's Faith was deep; there was no need to probe. The Lord's Commandments were as natural to Lizzy as breathing in the air; the Bible was not something she would have spent her energies dissecting.

"Why hurt yourself?" she chided lovingly. "The Lord knows every nook and cranny of your heart."

"Does He?"

"The state of Kansas knows you live to benefit your fellow man. So don't you think He does? He who counts every star?"

"I give and sympathize. Is it enough?"

"It is," she told him firmly.

She ran a double check and came out satisfied. Jan had been baptized properly. He was careful to set an example. He did not have a single serious vice. Not even Doctorjay, not one to give up on his silly bet about the fire water, could make him have that sinful sip out of that flask he still kept hidden somewhere.

She added for good measure. "You tithe. You're generous."

Jan kept on giving lavishly to every church event; in fact, he went so far as to champion the Episcopalian Temperance Drive. He also supported the Annual Bake Sale the Baptists put on, and the Methodist Orphans, and even the Salvation Army.

In summary, Jan was his town's most trusted citizen. Without unnecessary words, he put his wealth into His service, quietly. Old Lizzy knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jan lived in accordance with the Holy Spirit; he felt it; he respected it; what more was there to say?

"You set a wonderful example for other congregation members," she told him lovingly, and Jan gave more and more.

"Say, would it help to make you feel a little better," Jan asked, when all else failed, hoping to spark his wife out of her melancholy mood, "if I went back to Apanlee and took a look myself?"

She said while rising feebly on one elbow: "Well, can I come along?"

That would have terrified the best of husbands, but Jan was as patient as ever. He lowered the boom of his voice. He kept tucking her into her sheets.

"You are still weak and out of touch with your own body, dearest. I promise I will keep an open mind. I'll watch out for an opportunity. No one knows what's going on in Russia. It might be dangerous."

She did not argue that. She hardly ever argued. Jan could no more have touched her heart than he could have touched the horizon. The closer he came, the more she retreated. A famine of the grayest kind had settled on her spirit. It seemed as though

something of devastating avarice had sucked the marrow from her bone. Her appetite left much to be desired. No stick-to-the-rib food for Josie. A bean soup lunch was all.

She knew in a vague way that Jan kept trying to break down the bureaucrats in Washington to ship those needed harvesters, and she approved of that. The papers wrote it up. That's where the matter stopped.

"It is as though I forgot what to make of myself. Or of others," she said to Little Melly.

The spinster just tiptoed around her. "Whatever you want. Whatever you say."

If reproach she must speak, it was gentle, and patience was her middle name. "Try to remember, Josephine. It's critical. One ounce of cloves. Two tablespoons of cinnamon—"

Ladle after ladle full of Little Melly's patience finally paid off, for Josie, who had loved her reds and lilacs over every other color, no longer spurned the somber hues that Lizzy recommended.

No longer was she mocking providence with high heels and lofty proclamations. Gone was the way she flung apart that napkin in her lap. All knew she had diminished powers, and since she did not seem to want to heal—checkmated thoroughly by menopause and melancholia!—the drive to get those harvesters to Apanlee quietly petered out.

# Chapter 57

Mimi knew there were dangers in prayers. When the feverish family prayers began, she stepped aside to sit on an upturned milk bucket. Her eyes were on the floor. Her heart began to race. Who could say who was watching? You had to be sure.

"The Lord will protect you. The Lord will provide." That's what her brothers said. Her teacher, gaunt and famished, had lectured her repeatedly: "Do not destroy the Party from within."

The teacher said each morning, her hungry eyes on her: "One of my brightest and my best. A keen and critical intelligence." Her brothers said: "Your turn now, Mimi dear."

"I can't. Say what you will. I can't."

Bewildered eyes turned anxiously on her. "We're praying for relief. Don't risk what we are praying for by angering the Lord."

She listened to the wind outside, soaked through with rain, rattling on the windows and whining through the gaping holes. Relief was coming? Well and good—but what if, with it, arrived menacing foreigners and tricksters? Forewarned was better than forearmed. That's what the teacher said.

"Behold the fowls in the air," prayed Yuri, Faith shimmering, small drops of mercury, in his wide-open eyes. "For they sow not, nor gather unto, yet your heavenly father feedeth—" His husky voice broke from the strain of duty and conviction. "—your heavenly Father feedeth—"

Sasha obediently took up the chant, perspiring with his brother's lie. "—feedeth us all."

"It can't be otherwise, for He hath—"

"—promised us!"

Larissa's hands touched Yuri's first, then Sasha's. The words came by themselves. "No news as yet?"

"Not yet. Maybe tomorrow?"

"Our time is running out. Relief is overdue. Thus we—"

"—thus we beseech Thee, Father—"

"—our Father of all creatures—"

"—to help us in our need!"

The little girl watched the deception closely, taking slow and shallow breaths. She leaned into the shadows and wiped a furrowed brow. A spasm fluttered in her chest. Faith? Easier to force down a pebble.

The twins, who had been spared, would credit Faith with widening the margin between a sorrowful subsistence and the grave—for it was up to them, they realized with ever sharper certainty, to hold their Faith aloft until the testing time was done.

For this they knew: The testing time was now! The alms were coming; they were coming! But Faith was needed; prayers, too; the Holy Ghost was quickened morning, noon, and night—and though they knew the seed was coming, verily! as per a thousand prayers—why, if the weather intervened and stalled the shipment from America, they might not live to benefit.

"Next week for sure," said Yuri, full of hope, the gentler, calmer of the twins. "If not next week, then soon!"

The adults linked their hands. For her own safety and protection, the child was left outside their prayer circle. She was still small. It drove the salt into her eyes. She knew that, by refusing

to be part of the old ritual, she sabotaged the Faith, important to her family. But, on the other hand, could she impair her country's beaming future by yielding her young mind to superstition? That's what the teacher said.

Her head spun with confusion. Her shoulders slumped with misery. The soil beneath her thoughts was slippery.

Good folks in faraway America—a place where wheat stood tall and thick, where all the streets were strewn with gold, where many cousins lived a rich and haughty life, where supper tables bent with riches—were sending food to feed her. That's what her brothers claimed. She was so hungry she felt dizzy, but on the other hand, she knew that spies were watching and reporting.

She could not bring herself to say a single word to further Faith, but she held up her face, as though by accident, to be touched by Natasha's benevolent icon.

Marleen had written once again, as carefully and poetically as Uncle Benny used to write. Despite a wobbly pen, she looped the smallest letter, as Uncle Benny used to loop, but where was the reply?

"Send us your grain, for otherwise we perish," Marleen wrote, tearfully, while Mimi stood and watched, alone with a child's thoughts.

Here was her crime: she still had half a crust, of which her family knew nothing, an unexpected windfall straight from the barter market. Nobody knew that it was there, deep in her ragged coat. One of the argumentative, recruiting Pioneers had given it to her.

"We need your help," he had said, winking knowingly.

She owned that crust. She kept it as an iron ration in her pocket. She fingered it for reassurance now and then.

"—in the name of the Father—" chanted Yuri, his burning eyes on her.

"—and the Son—" muttered Sasha, whose face took on a purple sheen each time he prayed like that.

"One little word. Just one. Please, Mimi? If no one knows,

what harm is there in prayer?"

What harm? How could they ask?

If she reneged, she sabotaged her family. If she obeyed, she yielded to dishonor.

"Take tiny bites," said Yuri, parceling the meager rations, "to make the taste stretch out—"

Natasha poured some heated water. "Here, drink this, child—" She said in a low voice as she had done already a hundred times before: "Among us, we don't cry."

That, too, was Faith—that hunger would diminish by illusion.

"No one will know," coaxed Sasha. And Yuri, bringing up the rear: "What is a little prayer, said in near-silence if you wish, as long as no one knows?"

She was like any child. She longed to please and placate. What if her lack of Faith stalled the important shipment? But what would be the end result if someone told on her?

She heard the teacher laugh. She heard the children tease her without mercy. Where was this entity called Holy Ghost when good, kind people—dearth in their very sinews and vermin in their hair—now needed Him the most?

She squirmed with her divided loyalties. She wanted to shut out their glances; she wanted to plug up her ears. Faith? Prayers? Holy Ghosts? Old wives' tales, all. She wanted none of that.

She knew smart people had stopped praying to free their minds for reason. She knew, because her teacher told her daily in words too big for her small heart, that reason was the only way to pull her proud, defiant country from the depths of devastation.

She knew there was no God—no heresy among the learned.

"Clear thought," the teacher said, "will choke religion. All religion. Does anybody disagree?"

The teacher had explained to her the dangerous deception in lesson after lesson, while purging from her pupils' mind all thoughts of Jesus Christ.

"There is no God," the teacher said each day. "The nightin-

gales are gone."

This teacher told the government inspectors who came periodically to stamp out Faith among the young: "This little girl? One of our brightest and our best. I set great store by her."

"Don't slip on a rotten tomato—" the teacher said each day. When the teacher spoke up to praise Mimi, all the children fell quiet in the room. When the teacher mocked Faith in the foolish, the classmates howled with mirth.

"There is no God," the teacher said repeatedly. "I have your best at heart." And if that teacher had the smallest inkling that Mimi, up for promotion to the rank of Pioneers in just a few short years, still practiced her appalling prayers, she would have called her to the front of the class. The guilty bench was waiting. That's where the dunces sat.

There was no God—that much was clear, no matter what her kneeling brothers claimed in their repeated, furtive whispers. She was resolved she would not stain the future of the Motherland by yielding her clear mind to noxious fables.

But all that—easier said than done!

When she looked at her brothers, imbued with burning Faith, the old-fashioned prayers just flew to her lips. She had to bite down on her tongue to keep them from jumping like frogs. Besides, might she receive another crust? When they saved up an extra crust, it always went to Mimi.

It all came down to this: she had no choice; she had to stay alive to help in the regeneration of her country. She would grow up to bring great honor to the Revolution. She would plant birch trees everywhere. She would bring pride to Russia.

All that lay burning deep inside, where she kept several other similar deceptions against the people she loved most—deceptions much too ghastly to reveal.

Word came at last: it came over the telegraph poles. If Mimi held her left ear pressed to the pole, already slippery with hoar—why, she could hear the message hum.

Joy rushed through every nerve end. America was sending food! The miracle was here!

On the spot, she decided to meet it half-way.

Soles flapping, the chill of raindrops in her nape, her small hands red and glassy, she walked on, resolutely. She needed to make sure. Her feet, bloated grotesquely with hunger fluid, no longer fit into her shoes. She knew she had to last—somehow she must survive. She knew that food was coming—she knew that for a fact and with the instinct of a very hungry child.

Against her will, she started chanting guiltily: "In the name of the Father—" which seemed a small concession, since hunger gnawed her belly like a rodent, but in her hollow gut she knew: At last! At last! Good food was on the way. Where was the harm in drawing just a little bit on superstitious magic as long as no one knew?

"—and the Son—" This for Sasha!

"—and the Holy Ghost." For Yuri, whom she loved best of all!

Although she felt so faint she had to sit down several times, she kept on, leaning hard against the rain, determined to make sure. She drew on Faith against all better evidence.

She swallowed and then finished: "Amen!" This for her mother's sake who grieved the dwarfish child.

This baby sister, born of the horrid night, had died some time ago, but still her mother grieved. Dead, but not lost, her mother said, without a single tear. That was her comfort now. Her baby girl sat hand in hand with Him, the King of Kings, the Emperor of all the heavens, now free of hunger, without pain.

"Safe," said her brother, Yuri.

"Forevermore," said Sasha, crediting the Lord.

She, Mimi, was no fool; she saw the gaping earth. No God. No Son. No Holy Ghost. The hungry sparrows chirped that message from the roof. The baby girl was gone.

But still, she liked the story.

Now that the infant was no more, Natasha once again was cradling her in murky moments in place of that small baby girl,

now cold in death and dark beneath its fingernails, and not a budding Pioneer, alive, and first in all her classes.

With blue lips she carefully nibbled her crust. She softened it with spittle and sucked the moldy taste. She had to be careful; there were three loose teeth in her mouth.

She took a deep and trembling breath. Death sat in wait. Natasha had told her that death, in the end, came to all. The baby died, just toppled over sideways, and kept one eye still open as though it had been tricked. Natasha had no explanation whatsoever why it would look like that.

The dead lay everywhere. Just this morning, she had counted thirteen bodies lying scattered in the hedges—lying everywhere, in fact. By the roadside they lay, underneath the mulberries, out on the crumbling sidewalks, along the unused railroad tracks. There they lay, the dying and the dead, poor devils from the cities, swept here by foolish rumors, wrapped in their rags or sacks, in their pockets the last peels, perhaps, of a shriveled and stolen potato.

"At Apanlee, there's wheat," they said as if a wish for miracles could make a miracle come true. Faith or no Faith, they died. That was the bottom line. They died in the hedges; their skull-like heads on a bundle of rags. This much was clear: the dead did not look happy.

She took a greedy gulp of air. She knew she had to last, somehow she must survive. The teacher told her every day she had to stay alive to help regenerate her country.

She would not put her stock in Holy Ghosts unless she checked the source and evidence with her own vintage eyes.

"Amen!" she said again, this time defiantly.

Some people died. Not she!

Death would not take her by the neck without a struggle first. She would fight good and hard. She, only yesterday a child of privilege and position, would swallow ground bones! Seeds of weeds! Dust! Rodents! Anything!—why, she would eat the very earth of Russia!

"—in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen."

A carriage approached from the distance, spattering soft mud. The harness jingled merrily. Two men sat on the lorry.

Mimi hid what was left of her crust in her coat. No need to arouse anyone's envy.

"Hey there! Say! Tell us! Quick! Which way to Apanlee?"

She saw at once—those two were professional looters. They sported boots that gleamed, and they wore furs, with not a button missing. Both wore new caps, along with woolen shawls.

"Huh?" Mimi stalled, while narrowing her eyes.

The older was a man with beefy hands and yellow teeth; the younger one looked strangely faceless, ageless, and remote.

"Hop up. Can you give us directions?" the older of the two said sharply. He had a round moon face. Though short and paunchy, kind of squat, he looked well-fed indeed. His belly spilled across his belt and sat there, like a watermelon, on his knees. The lanky youth beside him peered at her out of one milky eye. "Hey, you! Cat got your tongue? Where's Apanlee?"

"Huh? Apanlee?" Fear showed on her forehead in droplets. The rodent in her stomach gnawed raw flesh. What were these people doing here, all dressed as for a carnival? Their voices had a queer, peculiar twang. They looked disdainful yet familiar. She lifted her small chin. She felt her jaws lock firmly. She had practiced her untroubled gaze. There was no room at Apanlee for strangers.

The fat man raised his voice. He had a nasal twang. "You! Are you deaf? Where's Apanlee?" He started pelting her with tricky questions. "You don't live here? What are you doing here? Alone? All soaking wet in this cold rain? Have you no sense at all? Where is your family?"

He was smooth-shaven to the point where she could see his pimples. She noted reddish hair, a freckled face, a fleshy nose, fat, curling lips. He probably kept company with other thieves and gangsters. Behind him piled huge burlap sacks. She swal-

lowed hard. Her instincts did a somersault: had he arrived to rob? Would he start dumping drawers?

"What do you want?"

The older gave a cackling laugh. "What do we want? Why, not a thing. What do you people want?" He turned his face and told the younger one. "Just think of Little Melly's fire trucks. For this?" He fixed a wintry stare on her that shot through the rags of her coat like a sword. He leaned forward and gave her a poke in the ribs with his finger.

"We've come to visit Apanlee. Now tell us. Where is Apanlee?"

Her eyes grew wide with alarm. "Keep following the road," she said, now forcing cheer into her voice. "That way. That way to Apanlee."

"That way?"

"Right! Right! That way."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. Pretty soon you'll reach a shack. The road will fork. Turn right there. Keep on going—"

Apanlee lay to the left. You couldn't be too careful. No margin left for error.

# Chapter 58

"Well, look at that. That must be it. That must be Apanlee." The Elder Dewey's Adam's apple danced to the oscillation of emotion. He stroked his temples thoughtfully.

"You're right. That must be it," said Archibald, his chin in one of Little Melly's furs.

"That's it!" said Dewey, forcefully. "That's it! That's it! I can't believe my eyes!"

His earlobes had turned scarlet. He stared, and there was unrelieved disgust and loathing written in his face.

This was ghost country here and could not rightfully be called by any other name. It was late afternoon; the rain had stopped at last, but it was cold and dreary. His kidney stones shot rays into his groin. "Where are the people, Archie?"

For days, he and his son had traveled over muddy and, at time, half-frozen roads in search of needy relatives. Pushed into this endeavor against his will—for Jan had given him no peace until he packed and went—the Elder Dewey went, expecting an emergency. But ruins instead of homes? And weeds instead of vegetables? His voice was strangely slurred; he sounded as if he

were drunk.

"They must have sinned," he said. "This is God's punishment."

"Well, there you have it, Dad," said Archibald. "It looks as though the hoppers have devoured every single blade of grass."

He, too, had reached the last stage of exhaustion, for as he passed through village after village, he who had come to bring both food and gospeling, thought that the populace would greet him, overjoyed, but no! They shrank away from him.

He had expected hats to fly into the air at his arrival; instead, wherever he encountered people, they stood with eyes downcast.

"Just what is going on?"

"Well. You tell me."

Way back in Washington, while being briefed on what to say, what not to say, because the government was touchy regarding certain views, the Elder Dewey had been told that Russia was a country savage, poor and insignificant. But this? He had been told that rubles were counted in millions while bread would be counted in crumbs. He had been briefed on hunger, terror and despair. All that made little difference.

His inner eye saw landscapes all his own. Some deep and lasting pictures out of his past told of a bounteous time. He had grown up with fairy tales of yesterday from Noralee, from Doctorjay, from Lizzy, from old neighbors. He knew of Jan's ancestral home, for Noralee had chiseled out for him the serene world of Apanlee, where children and pets were petted and pampered, where troikas parked with arrogance in long and lofty lines to unload the nobility of yesterday, while humble footmen, one by one, stood waiting for their orders.

"Ah, Apanlee," said Noralee, who in her youth had scrubbed and bleached its linens, agog and smitten with the glamor and perfection. While he was still a child and unwise to the wiles of autocrats, he had absorbed it all with veneration mixed with envy.

Now this?

Where was the trodden goose path for the barefoot neighbor children who came to play at Apanlee? Where were the sun-

drenched haystacks? The cozy summer kitchen where generations had assembled to drink their scented tea in peace and harmony on languid summer afternoons?

The Elder Dewey sat atop his lorry, staring. He sat there, wating, but nobody sprang to his aid. In the end, he made a fist and gave his son an energetic punch.

"We might as well—" he said, and cleared his throat for added volume, while his mouth twisted in a grimace of distaste.

"Yes. Yes. We might as well," said Archibald, and started pulling on a hangnail. "There go our fire trucks." His missing eye, his right, was itching in its socket. His face took on a purple sheen. He, too, had his priorities. He, too, had his opinions. Could he forget that day—half of his vision gone, shot out by racial ill-will? For this? All fences hung in disrepair. The paint was flaking from the windows. Three doors were ripped from rusty hinges, and there were glass shards everywhere. This was the place the sentimental oldsters in his hometown longed to see? Jan's haughty forebears, once upon a time, had ridden through this gate, a bunch of unrepentant autocrats? A selfish Emperor-to-be had leaned against those crumbling steps? Where was the endless sea of wheat, just swaying with the songs of well-fed peasants? Where were the men of fortitude and strength who would, all summer long, be heartily engaged in never-ending races against the sinking sun?

For Archibald, it was a milestone moment, for something dark and murky and unspoken came to rest. For what he saw while he sat, staring, made for its own conclusions.

This was far worse than anything the Donoghues might have dreamed up to tear down ethnic pride and vex and aggravate the town. He, too, was but a human being, as Little Melly always said; he, too, had hoped the fire trucks at home would clean the town of heckling and give him breathing space.

"This disaster could never have—"

"—would surely never have happened in Kansas!"

"A travesty. A shame."

"The magic," said the Elder Dewey harshly, "has run out."

"Right. Man proposes. God disposes. This here is taking charity too far."

"Why!" Dewey cried out then, and rage built like a thunderstorm. "Look who's here! That little double-dealing viper that managed to lead us astray! We'll teach her a fine lesson!"

What Dewey saw at that triumphant moment was not a hungry child, forlorn in a weed-infested alley against a drab, dilapidated edifice, so famished that her eyes bulged in her face, but Josie! Josephine! In her defiance and contempt and brazenness, upsetting and unruly, unwilling to be gospeled. "Hey! You! Come here!" His moon face twisted with his loathing. "You lied to me!" he shouted. "You soiled your mouth! Come here so I can smack you!"

"I didn't know you, Citizen!" the youngster stammered, stumbling. "I didn't recognize your face!" She came running as soon as she saw she had made a mistake, but now she stood still in her tracks. She shuddered as though from the blow of an axe but she didn't back off; she stood holding her ground; she tilted her head to the strangers, and her eyes filled with great expectation.

"I am ashamed," said Dewey to the youngster, while fixing a bilious eye, "to be vaguely related to you."

"You aren't," said the child.

"What? What?" He eyed her balefully. Fat chance he'd swallow that! He had grown up and old anticipating trickery from Josie, repeatedly a menace to the plans and wishes of the Lord. He was still making count. Was he not wearing Kansas clothes? How could she miss his brand new hat, though soggy now from rain?

The child spoke very softly. "You are a foreigner. You came to see the changes the glorious Revolution wrought."

"We're all related to each other. Related over centuries."

While she stood, waiting, watching him, all but on tiptoes, verily! he kept on looking for a hitching post on which to tether his two horses. He barked: "Here. Hold the reins! We must be cousins. Or else, I am your uncle."

She kept her distance now. She did not offer help.

"We are your cousins from America," yelped Archibald, whose voice had not yet found its bedrock. "We've come to help. Where is your gratitude? You lied! Why did you lie? Why in the good Lord's name did you decide to lead us astray in this rain?"

She did not reply. She was small; she was cold and she shivered; she kept staring at Dewey, who now sensed a chilling reserve. This was no agreeable female!

"Here. I said hold the reigns." He kept her in the corner of his eye. He knew her kind. Here was the cause that drained those nickels from his church he needed sorely to throw a monkey wrench into the Methodists. He spat. He was settling a very old score. "You're a liar! That's what you are. A brazen, shameless liar!"

He could spot her ilk without trying. She was the kind who, numb to Faith and all its benefits, would tell him before long, unblinking, as soon as she grew old enough to face him, toe to toe: "I have no use for you." He arched damp eyebrows, furious. "My, what a place! What is the matter with you people? Where is your pride? Did you not know that relatives were coming? Did we not write to you? Why did you not clean up?"

A wave rose deep within. The curfew he had sacrificed to keep the Donoghues in check—for this? This landscape, bleak and bare?

These frightened and emaciated creatures who now materialized from the bushes, who stretched out bony hands to him yet shrunk against the wall?

He took a deep, deep breath. He flexed ten angry fingers. For once, he saw the truth. For once, his judgment stood redeemed. When German farmers starved to death on the world's richest acres, there had to be a moral failing. Here's where his role came in.

The more in need a flock, the stronger was his ministry!

He reached for his stilted High German, turned into a hickory stick. "Do not be mistaken!" he hollered, now shaking his fist at the shadows. "God is not mocked, nor is He deceived. For what-

ever a man sows, that he will also reap—"

At that, the youngster backed away as though she were attacked by wasps.

"But praise the Lord," hectored Dewey, now swinging. "It's never too late. You liar, you! You cheat! But I, for one, shall do my best to shed the Gospel light on you."

"You will. You will," said Archibald, and put a soothing hand atop his father's twitching knee.

"I will!"

"Calm down! You'll teach her things. You will."

"That's right. I will. You bet your bottom dime I will!"

The Elder Dewey flicked a smart, determined whip across the horses' bony shanks and rolled into the gates of Apanlee to do the Lord's strict bidding.

The Elder Dewey checked his brand of Faith into the halls of Apanlee as though he checked a hat. He knew his own Faith's worth. He knew it to the penny, and it was not for free. It came in thirty burlap sacks packed seam to seam with grain. He also had with him, deep in his cardboard suitcase, the one-and-only Gospel, as rich as lentil soup.

By evening, a crowd had gathered, all stretching out their trembling hands to get the food that Mennotown had sent. Night fell, and still more came.

They climbed out of cellars and down from their ovens; they materialized out of the bushes. They would not shake his hand, nor would their eyes meet his. They tried to rush the bags.

He culled their faces, one by one. They were a ghastly sight. They looked as though a ghost would come and snatch them on the spot. They exchanged anguished, significant glances and ducked when he tried to take pictures.

His anger belched like lava. He had arrived to bring them charity; where was their gratitude? Here was bread; here was seed; but it came packed in sensible rules. It came with appropriate conduct. It required the Lord be praised loudly.

He asked for bright smiles to display on the bulletin boards

in the churches back home. He asked them to join hands to form a prayer circle.

The shadow people never raised their lids. Not even the oldsters seemed willing to join. All stood with downcast eyes.

Before he started parceling the goodies the volunteers back home, all squealing with devotion, had readied for the voyage, he read them a timely Bible verse first, expertly navigating through the Gospel while showing off agility.

"As we have opportunity, " he hectored, glowering, a pencil in his teeth with which he started checking off their names, "let us do good to all—"

This was symbolic only. How many qualified?

No easy task to get a handle on a number. He could not feed them all. Not having any better gauge, he went by their *umlauts* and freckles. He gave them extra helpings—he could be sure of them. He launched himself more firmly. "The power of the Gospel is much stronger than the power of the state," he lectured. Might as well.

They stood in silence. Shivering. They stared at him, wordless, as though he were daft. He had never felt so out of place. He couldn't wait to head back home, shake hands with folks in Mennotown. He knew that, once he told them what he found, they'd witness properly and boost his missionary kitty.

He made the shadows walk right underneath the church insignia that Little Melly had cross-stitched for him, her face all vague and dreamy. "You, there! You lead us now in grace. You speak your prayer thanks," he chided the dishonest child, ambitious to make an example.

She shook her head. Her lips were quivering.

"Repeat after me: 'Let us give thanks'" It was clear that she wanted his food; it was equally clear she was scared to admit she was hungry. He saw the subdued terror, but he saw this as well: her bulging eyes were glued to his fat burlap sacks, and that gave him his margin.

"Well? We are waiting."

She had no words in her defense. Her brow was damp with

sweat. Her nose looked pinched. Her eyes were wide. She did seem pitifully starved.

Still, could he let this opportunity pass by? He had to come right out and demand forcefully: "Somebody needs to witness. Openly. Without it, there's no food."

"I can't." She backed away from him.

He followed her and bore down hard. "Look, here! I know you're hungry, aren't you? I know you need some nourishment to fill your little belly. But first things first. You lied to me this afternoon. Why did you lie to me?"

"I did not know you, Citizen."

He held a piece of bread aloft as though it were a trophy. "See this? I want you to apologize." Against his better judgment, he felt a stab of pity for the girl, but that did not alter his purpose. She was unwilling, clearly, for not one word came forth. The crowd looked on in silence.

"I said apologize!"

Her face started twitching. Her shoulders contracted as though under blows. He hovered over her.

"What did I tell you? Huh? Are you sorry you lied? Are you sorry?"

"Just say you're sorry," coaxed Archie, who understood the sting of being singled out for punishment. "Come on. Say sorry, honey. Say pretty please and sorry."

She spoke up then. She spoke so softly that he could barely hear.

She said: "These alms are not from love."

Dewey let go of his ladle and stiffened his spine. Here was his evidence. This here was Josephine who argued everything. This one would not bend short of breaking.

He, on the other hand, knew what his calling was, or else there was no soup tureen. "Now listen here! Young lady!" Much as a train was building up steam, so Dewey was building up anger. He told her, thick with rectitude: "You played fast and loose with the truth. Will you apologize? Here is my hand. That's all I am asking. Just say you are sorry. Come on. Say you're sorry—"

She lifted herself up on tiptoes.

"Just say it. Just say you are sorry," prompted Archie. He was nervously biting his hangnail. "Look. Look. Why not apologize? You know lies have short legs—"

The child glanced at her calves, confused. They were swollen from unhealthy fluid. "I didn't know you, Citizen—"

"You heard me. You heard me loud and clear. Just say you're sorry, and all is forgotten." He was rapidly losing his patience. "Why did you lie to me?"

She stared into his wind-shot eyes. She saw he had hair in his nostrils.

"Well? Do I have all afternoon?"

She spoke between clenched teeth, but loud enough for the last bystander to hear. "I would walk many miles," she said, "just to avoid you. Hear? You have no place in Russia. You are a foreigner and trickster."

Rage twisted his shoulder and shot through his chest like a bolt. It was clear that she wanted that fat slice of bread that he held in his hand, out of reach—she wanted it so desperately her eyes protruded from her skull. Her need was as raw as the weather.

He stood on tiptoes, for his part, while holding it aloft. "Hey! Hey! Do you apologize? Or not? I expect you to say you are sorry!" It seemed to him the hive was humming angrily, but he was not afraid. He knew he had the upper hand, for he had rectitude. He had that piece of bread. He held it up with his right hand while he spread all five stubby fingers of his left to count out the rest of her sins: her cheeks unwashed, her hair untrimmed across her brow, the vermin crawling on her collar—a sullen, unkempt youngster in need of stricter discipline. America wept with the weeping, but on the other hand, nobody spared the rod in Mennotown.

"You won't say you are sorry? You won't? All right. So pay the piper. Have it your way. You asked for it. It looks like you'll just have to go to bed without supper!"

For Dewey, the issue was settled. A modern century was on

its way, and in this heathen country—or so he was instructed while being briefed in Washington, D.C.—the most recalcitrant, vagabond, worthless of children were seen as a national resource. In atheistic Russia, you couldn't even spank them with your horse strap any more! Conspiratorially, he winked at Archibald who kept track of the names on the list.

"Too bad! Too bad!" winked Archie, who read his father's thoughts. "Looks like we're running short. Looks like there is nothing left over for liars. You will just have to wait. You have all night to think it over. And if you come, tomorrow morning, and tell us you are sorry—"

He and his father, Dewey, were cut from the same cloth. This here was a showdown of values. Bad habits must be trimmed, and they had the gardener's shears.

The forces that shape history are splinters, left deep in martyred flesh. This story is now many decades old, but Mimi still remembers it as though it happened yesterday—and so does Archibald.

That day, they eyed each other, and they knew. They still do, to this day.

For on that dreary, hungry afternoon they glimpsed a flash of savage hatred in each other's eyes that neither one would ever manage to forget—and to this day, God speaks to Mimi sneeringly through Archie's mealy mouth.

Here is what followed next.

When all had finished eating, he went to look for her. He spoke about redemption and salvation while holding food aloft.

"See this fine piece of bread? I've saved it up for you."

He, Archie, would not easily give up. This bread came on the wings of Faith. This bread came back to back with rules. He hadn't come this far to spread the promise of the Gospel to get all soft-bellied with pity. He had to trim her claws, for if he didn't, here and now—why, everlasting hell would not be hot enough.

"This is for your own good. If we let your defiance go unpunished, you will develop a strange character." Here was his

chance to step into his father's preacher shoes, to force a timely lesson.

He took her by the shoulders. "This minute, you apologize! You will! You will! You will!"

He spoke not only for himself; he spoke for Dewey who was wet and chilled and tormented by kidney stones, who knew full well that, in his absence, the Methodists would make the rounds and snare the undecided.

"I won't."

If nothing else, he could still pinch. He pinched.

She twisted, and she ducked. She slipped out of his fingers.

He asked himself: "What kind of child is this?"

She did not ask herself—she knew.

He watched her face go slack. She saw his lips snarl odiously. "What's it to me?" said Archibald, and laughed derisively.

It was a nasty laugh. The devils danced in it for quite a while. They danced and didn't stop.

She heard that laugh and stored it. That laugh held many things, but mostly this: he owned the food; she owned her hunger. Both knew there was bad blood between them, and it would never go away.

That, too, is history. He knew that she had stared the Devil in the eye as he had not, and never would, for she was hard as nails; she came of tested stock; her pale, set face told volumes. And he was pulp—a worm without his Bible.

That day, she was so famished she felt faint, but still she sensed the weakness that was central to his character and message. She knew that on the pulpit, it came out, revealed as sleazy staple. How did she know? She had been witness to the empty burlap sacks that fell around his ankles to the floor. She knew forevermore that nothing coming from America—or from the Gospel, for that matter—would come to her for free.

# Chapter 59

They ran in packs, the mangy children of the Revolution, frostbite softening their toes, hunger shining brightly in their eyes. They roamed the dying city of Berdyansk in search of food and prey.

They came upon the freezing boy who huddled, knees drawn to his chin, within the shelter of an abandoned cattle box. He tried to shrink into himself, but they surrounded him. "Look here! A kulak boy! Hey, you! Hey, kulak boy!"

They emptied his pockets: a pencil stub, a cross-stitched handkerchief, three little wooden animals. "Your name? What is your name?"

He shook his head. They did not press the matter.

"How old are you?"

"Ten. I am ten."

It was the first lie of his life, born of the instinct to survive. To demonstrate his nonchalance, he broke off a dirty icicle and started sucking it. They pointed to a cat. He understood at once. They were the mob. He was alone. He saw and seized the opportunity. He stalked it patiently all morning. In the end, he

threw a well-aimed rock. A little jump — he had it by its hind legs.

Triumphantly, he took it to the horde. They howled with glee and slapped him on the shoulders. They skinned the twitching animal. They terrorized a beggar woman, until she relented and fried it for them.

He watched what they were doing and learned their tricks from them. He sat with them on many a street corner, begging. He followed vague rumors of food.

He slept his afternoons away, for then the sun shone warmest. He slept by the roadside, in tunnels, in doorways. The dead piled up so high he couldn't see the fence. He knew that they were waiting for the thaw to have a burial of sorts.

At night, he slithered from lamp post to lamp post. He ate whatever he found—a frozen potato, half-rotten cabbage, the heel of an old loaf of bread. In a pinch, there was always a handful of earth.

He spent his mornings near the rails where foreign journalists passed by sometimes, their pencils poised like lances—all gullible, all easily deceived. He held them in contempt. He told them many lies.

Once, through a sudden streak of luck, he found a bag of onions. He sold them, one by one. With the money thus obtained, he rented a small child.

"Shhh! You!" he expertly scolded the infant. "Who cuddles you? Who tickles you? Who gives you tiny kisses?"

He took good care of it, knowing that its warmth was as comforting as a baked brick out of Natasha's oven. He still saw his Baba's face clearly. He no longer remembered the others.

He liked the small child casually; it was his life insurance. It never failed to melt the hearts of foreign passersby so that they rained their kopecks into his waiting hand. He warmed it, and he rocked it. He worried it would shrivel up on him while he sat—waiting, begging. It kept on whimpering beneath the cold and cheerless rain until his patience broke. He put it in the gutter

carefully, face down, did not look back, and stealthily moved to the other end of town.

He spent a night in jail for panhandling excessively on a street corner where foreigners passed by. He did not mind at all. It was a quiet, dry place, much warmer than out in the streets.

In the morning, he was given a broom and a pan and told to sweep the floor. He was a quick study. He knew how to drive a sharp bargain.

"If I can sleep here every night, I'll spy on foreigners and tricksters," he offered himself to the guards. They roared and slapped him on the shoulders.

It was on such a wind-blown corner, where Dewey Epp of Mennotown, on his way back from Apanlee, saw lifted from the rags and filth of anarchy a face that made him stop.

"My God," he said to Archibald. "Look at this boy. That's one of us. Could that be one of us?"

A bony arm stretched from a threadbare coat. An urchin, straight out of the gray of the gutter!

"Bread! Bread!" the urchin whined expertly. "I haven't eaten anything for days!" His instinct told him to use German.

"That boy," said Archie, staring, "looks just like Auntie Josie's Rarey."

In the gaunt face, there was a sharp alertness, in his blue eyes the blueprint left by centuries. The youngster wore good boots—expensive leatherware, but worn to shreds, cut off at the heels to facilitate running. The soles were tied with string. A bird's voice kept on pleading: "Just half a slice of bread—"

The Elder Dewey cleared his throat. "Say, guttersnipe. Do you know of a place called Apanlee?"

The urchin flinched as though he had been hit. "I don't know what you mean."

He started shuffling, sullenly. He watched both strangers from the corner of his eye.

The younger man, the pimply one, said swiftly: "Well. Listen, little fellow. Just don't be scared. We'll see what we can

do." The older one, who had a pumpkin belly and wore a pair of horn-rimmed glasses, still scowled with indecision, whereas the other one reached out for him and tried to take him by the hand.

The ragged street child shrank away. He wouldn't let himself be touched.

"All right. All right," said Archie, irritated. And Dewey added: "We won't bite. Follow us."

The urchin followed meekly, head lowered, fists buried deeply in his coat.

"Dad, don't you think—"

"No. I said no."

"But Dad—"

"I said no, Archie. No! Forget it. In Mennotown, we don't need kids like that. We have the Donoghues."

But Archie understood a misfit's needs. He understood them, achingly. "He has no name. He has no memory, it seems."

"He's probably deceiving you," ventured Dewey.

"He says the State is his father, the glorious Revolution his mother—"

"Some jokester. Some jokester we picked up." Disgusted, Dewey took the youngster's cap and flung it in the fire, while Archie stripped him of his rags. "Stand right there, by the door, so I can measure you. How old are you?"

Archie took a pair of scissors and cut the matted fringes from his brows. "See, underneath that filth? My, what a handsome boy." His voice was strangely gentle.

The urchin bit his lips.

"I'd like to take you home," he said to him in halting German. "I'd like to take you to America. The Boy Scouts will be good for you. They'll clean you up. They'll know how to straighten you out."

"No, you do not," said Dewey, in sharp English.

"But I—"

"I said no, Archie. That's my verdict. That is it."

"Perhaps—"

"Don't blow against the hurricane. He knows only the filth of the streets. What would he do in Mennotown? We don't need vagabonds like that. We have our own. As I already pointed out, we have the Donoghues."

But Archie's heart was pounding painfully. He ached to bring some light into those ancient eyes. He took the urchin by both hands.

"Your Savior died for you," he told him eagerly, not knowing what else he might say.

"Who shot him?" asked the child, and pulled his hands away.

"No one shot Him," said Archie, sharply. "Why, what a horrid thing to say! You need to have your mouth washed out with soap. Our Savior died for you. For me. For all of us. For our grievous sins."

The urchin had a smooth reply. "To kill is easier than to convince."

"Did you hear that? Dad, did you hear what he just said?"

"Some wise guy," scolded Dewey. "A real smart aleck, huh? Say, guttersnipe. What happened to your hand?"

The boy backed up. "No! Nothing."

"What do you mean, nothing? It's all red and infected. Here, let me soak it clean. It looks like something bit you. Did you tease a defenseless animal?"

"A dog? Let's see," coaxed Archie, too. "That is one ugly wound! Was it a dog? If so, we'll need some turpentine."

"No. Not a dog. A girl."

Archie backed away as though he had just touched a rattler. "A girl? What did you try to do? Come. Sit here by my side. Sit here with me, right by the window. I'll tell you all about our Savior Jesus Christ—" He tried to pull the urchin to his knees. His hands were weaving distressed circles. "See? It's like this. No matter who you are, no matter what you do, your Savior stands there, waiting. He'll wash away your sins. The choice is up to you—"

The urchin listened sullenly. A faint, pleasant memory stirred. Had he not heard it once before, this tale about this so-called

Savior, who would arrive in thunderbolts and darts of fire and still all hunger, dry all tears? He leaned against the stranger gingerly while something deep within turned drowsy and contented, while something inside broke, much like a helpless wave.

"See? It's like this," said Archibald, while tightening his arm. "The choice is up to you. No one can choose for you. It is all up to you. You can choose to hear the message, or you can choose to live with both your fingers in your ears. Now look me squarely in the eye and tell me this: would you not rather go to Heaven—"

The urchin snapped sharply to attention.

"Heaven," said the urchin nastily while pushing against Archibald, "is now a place for birds, for angels, and for fools."

There was no reaching him, though Archie did his best. He had an extra blanket; he would get up at night and try to cover him, but even in his sleep the urchin jerked his arm away as though touched by some poisonous rattler.

"Look, I'm your friend," said Archie, pleadingly.

"I do not need a friend. I've never had a friend."

"Well, now you do."

There was no soothing him. He rolled himself into a ball and slept with his back to the wall, his face to the door, refusing to lie next to Archie. "I'm hungry."

"But you just ate," said Archie.

"So?"

"Don't scoop the food up with your fingers. And don't tear the bread with your teeth. There really is enough left over for tomorrow."

"And fold your hands," ordered Dewey. "I taught you yesterday. No progress yet?"

"No progress yet," admitted Archie sadly. "The more I push, the more he's digging in his heels. The more his conscience hardens."

"A blunted conscience," Dewey found, and heard no contradiction.

The urchin stayed with them for several weeks, while the two preachers waited for the bureaucrats to reach the bottom of their pile of papers and straighten out a mix-up with their travel papers, still needing signatures and several red stamps.

They did not like the street child much; nor he them; that was mutual. By then, he had become a burden. He took, but didn't give. He didn't give an inch, no matter how they gospeled.

He ate. He slept. He heard their admonitions, his ancient eyes on them. He hardly ever argued back. He did exactly as he pleased.

He often escaped, but he always came back. His comings and goings were secret.

His pockets were bulging with flyers. At night, he emptied the last marmalade jar that Little Melly had packed.

"That is one guilty little thief," said Dewey Epp, not easily deceived. "What did I tell you, Archie?"

"Poor child. Poor child," mourned Archie in great pity, and at a total loss. "No matter what we do or say, he finds the Word of God revolting. A pity, Dad. A pity."

"He's hopeless. Did I not tell you from the start?"

Archie gave a long and bitter sigh, now speaking more from duty than conviction. "At least he's willing to sit through devotions. That's progress. Don't you think?"

If he looked hard, he saw some progress on good days, but it was slight—it was so slight that one might call it imperceptible.

"Why do you hate us so?" asked Archibald.

"Because you're spies," the gutter child said angrily. "You're harming Mother Russia."

"Why, that's a laugh. That is preposterous. We are the Lord's dispatchers."

"You're spies, and maybe worse."

"We are Americans. We are ambassadors of love. We're vassals of the Lord. We've come to heal the spirit."

The urchin shrugged and bit his lip. "If I were you—"

"Why? What is going on?"

The boy spoke up with quiet authority. "You better leave. And fast."

"What do you mean?" Some evil lay in wait that had no name, no focus. The aftermath of the triumphant Revolution had turned into a war of shadows.

"What are you saying, guttersnipe?"

"Five foreigners have disappeared at point of bayonet."

"But we've done nothing wrong!"

"That matters not. That matters not one whit."

Dewey looked at Archie, worried, and Archibald stared back. Neither one could force a smile. Before them stood the foundling, sullen.

"Just leave," he said. "Get out of here. Don't say you weren't warned."

A child might speed the paperwork; that was the Elder's reasoning—and, lo, it worked; it did. Between those two, the urchin crossed the borders amid the last small troop of foreigners who had come to see for themselves what the glorious Red Revolution had wrought.

The moment they arrived in Germany, the Bible smugglers vanished, as swiftly as they came, just ruddering with flying arms out of the chaos of the east and aiming for the safety of Kansas before another country, Germany, exploded like an overripe tomato and splattered everything with red.

"We'll send you two letters a year," shouted Archie, while Dewey gave him a powerful shove: "Jump! Jump! The train is slowing down."

The boy stared after them. He stood beneath a gray, indifferent sky—a gray louse in a cold, gray land he knew instinctively would show no mercy either.

He sat down in the snow and wept briefly, relieved to be free of them. He was glad to be done with their prayers—as violating as a body search, as exhausting as a night filled with mosquitoes. He knew he would not miss them.

The day was gray on gray. The only speck of color was a garish poster displaying the hammer and sickle. It kept on flap-

ping in the wind, torn and defaced. An angry hand had scrawled on it a hooked cross and spelled out in sharp, angled letters: "Events begin to favor A. H."

A question mark inside him grew. He hugged it to himself.

"Hey, there! Hey, you!"

Several children, no older than he, huddled forlornly in doorways—a rag-tag lot, in looks not all that different from the mangy pack he'd left behind in wind-torn, starving Russia. He hoped to strike up a friendship. He missed his little comrades with their hard eyes and nimble feet from whom he had learned to survive.

He gave them a tentative smile, but they did not respond; they sat, silent and hunched and defeated. He kept them in the corner of his eye. They watched him but did nothing.

"All right. If not, then not." His head was swimming with fatigue. His hands were cracked from cold. His belly hurt with hunger. He had sprained his left ankle when Dewey pushed him from the train—now every step he took shot knives into his groin.

He roused himself to action. He tried to jump onto a moving railroad car, but a gaunt brakeman took him by the ear and threw him back down on the asphalt.

Next, he followed an arrow that pointed to a shelter. It was a hovel, little more—a leaking roof, a foul-smelling latrine. He had lived in such hovels before. He looked around and found a corner. The bunks were filled with gray, defeated people. Their blankets smelled of urine and accumulated dirt.

"Have all good ghosts deserted you?" asked one. "Here. Share my stall with me."

His hands were moist and smelling sour. He had a cackling laugh.

A few weeks passed. A month. A year. Another. And another.

The sun was cold. The moon was silent. He emptied his eyes and his heart.

He lost all track of time. He felt as though he had no weight. He knew that he was young, yet he felt ancient and depleted. He slept badly; he stared into the darkness and listened to the rough

and brutal voices that wafted back and forth. He heard the thuds of anarchy. Despair gnawed the depth of his being. He was a struggling speck of will in this abysmal sea of dying flesh; he felt relief at last when someone came and took him by his collar, depositing him, none too gently, in an orphanage clear on the other side of town.

Again, it was a makeshift edifice, a former stable, boarded up, that had been built for sheep. A metal bar was laid across the gate. The padlock snapped shut with a click.

He claimed a bunk next to the oven. He defended that bunk with his teeth.

He felt ill. Foul. Confused. He hardly ever spoke. The winter kept on moaning through the broken door. His eyes were on the floor out of necessity—to find a cigarette stub was bliss. He hoarded butts. An intact butt could be exchanged for things that had enormous use: a box of bolts, a rusty knife, a crooked nail, most anything at all. In an unhinged and shattered world, you kept your eye on butts, the best of currencies.

He was a stubborn youngster; no one forced him to do anything. He rarely cried. He never laughed. He knew no one who did.

His thoughts were thoughts of stone.

He often ran away. No matter where he went, about him was the rancid smell of unwashed people who stood in queues with sullen faces, carrying barrels full of worthless money while waiting for a bowl of lumpish soup dispensed by the Committee of True Democrats to Aid Suburban Poverty.

He shook off every memory of Apanlee as one shakes off a slug.

That's how life was in Germany for many youngsters such as he before the light burst forth that poured caressing warmth onto the smallest insect, all struggling to survive.

From where she came, nobody knew. She was a slim and fragrant thing, almost a girl, yet many years a woman, wearing red patent leather shoes, a short blue skirt, a blouse so white it

blinded, beneath an open coat.

It was as though a shaft of light fell on that blouse and straight into the gutter. Her hair was the color of wheat.

She huddled next to him. "Hey, little one. What is your name?"

He shrugged. His memories were vague. The fat pretender preacher was the last who had called him by name. What was it? Guttersnipe.

She poked him gently with a rosy index finger. "You must have a name. Most everybody I know has a name. You cannot live without a name. Now tell me yours. What is it?"

The words came of their own accord. "I am not sure. My Baba called me Jonny."

He tried to tell her more, but his voice was no longer his own.

"I have the honor, Jonny." She smiled to give him courage. "Now that I know your name, I'd like to know how old you are. When was your birthday, Jonny?"

"I don't know that."

"Come on. Don't be afraid. How old are you?"

"Fifteen?" He squinted at her shyly.

She saw through his lie and straight into his heart as though her two cornflower eyes shot rays through a series of thin sheets of glass. "Nobody could be fifteen years of age, as handsome as you are, and not in uniform. Now, let me guess. Eleven? Twelve?"

He nodded miserably. "I think so. I'm not sure."

"It's not that bad. Is it? It could be worse? You will be fifteen in no time at all. Trust me. It doesn't take that long to grow into a man."

He swallowed. A wave started cresting within.

Her voice was warm, caressing. "Consider me. Compared to you, I'm practically Methuselah. My age is twelve times two plus one. How old is that? Is that some age, or what?"

He roused himself. "You're twenty-five?"

"That's right. My, you are smart."

It took enormous effort. "I think my name—my name is

Jonathan."

"My name is Hannelore, but everybody calls me Heidi." She resembled the heather—small and resilient, sun-baked and scented, attracting bees and ladybugs. She tugged him by his thumb. "Where are you from? Do you have any family at all?"

His head hung on his chest. "I am alone. I've been alone for years."

On each lapel, she wore a tiny pin that showed a hooked cross. She wore her coat wide open. "Who's taking care of you?"

"I don't need anybody." He saw her blouse had every button sewn in place. That blouse had not a single crease. It smelled sweetly of soap and hot iron.

"We all need friends. We all need family."

He scowled to keep her at bay. That part of him was dark and violent. His memories about the people he once called his family now danced and echoed through the space of many empty years.

"Might someone be looking for you?"

At that, something astonishing happened. The faces that he couldn't bear remembering rose from within as though from murky waters. They were still there. Each one of them. His grandparents. Marleen. Natasha. Sasha. Yuri. A little cousin, Mimi. His shoulders started heaving.

Her voice was low and thoughtful. "I have a hostel, nice and warm, for youngsters just like you."

He shook his head and thought his heart would fly apart. "I better not. I have too many enemies. They might just follow me."

She took his fists and put them both into the pockets of her coat. She started unfurling his fingers, slowly and methodically. She put both of his grimy hands, flat, on her spotless skirt.

"There. Feel that, Jonny. That is the future, Jonny. Right inside me. Below my heart. It's growing inside me."

Marleen! Heavy with progeny! That gesture was so achingly familiar, yet clearly from another world—he stood, his shaking fingers on her belly that was ballooning gently.

"See? Now you found me out. I'll have a little baby," she said with a small laugh.

He would have slunk away with shame, had she not nailed him to the spot with both her arms that snapped about him suddenly, just like a safety belt.

Those arms. That warmth. The trembling wonder of her presence. It held the universe in place. He felt his tears collect upon his chin and fall onto her shoulder while she stood, silent, waiting, pretending not to see that he was crying now, in heaving sobs, as he had never cried before, and never would again.

She let him cry it out.

When he had emptied every tear, she told him, friend to friend: "I have three sons already. I'm hoping for a girl. If it's a girl, I'll let you pick a name. If it's a boy, I'll name him after you. What do you say to that?"

He said, when he could speak again: "I am absurdly happy—" and did not know those were the very words that Uncle Benny kept, cross-stitched by Dorothy, for years atop his dictionary.

That's how it all began.

She had a ledger where she noted name, date, place, size, weight and comment: "Found wandering. In need of scrubbing, discipline and schooling."

She took him by the hand and up two flights of stairs. She handed him a cake of soap. "There, take a shower bath. The water's nice and warm." Goodness and patience shone from her face. She was of his blood. Of his sinews.

She said, a little later, while he sat in her kitchen, overcome: "Here, have a cup of coffee." She kept on refilling his cup, putting in sugar and cream. "What's this? You've stopped eating already? You have no respect for my food?"

Such were her gifts. She was a miracle. Obedience and worship were bred into him by his kin. He had not thought a human heart could hold such rapture as he was feeling now. She was like a flower that sat in a vase, just smiling and smiling at him. He could not yet smile back. He tried, but each smile crumpled.

As though she read his thoughts, she said: "The outside may be pillaged. The inside never changes, Jonny. Never. It may be buried, but it's there. You have a mind. A heart. A soul. There's work to do. Let's start with honesty. Where is your birthplace, darling? I can't endure another minute of this mystery."

"It's Apanlee," he said.

He told her more. He told her all he could; the rest he still held back. There was no way that he could tell her, yet, how Dorothy had died. Supine. Clubbed dead by anarchy. For being of the clan. Atop the old family tub.

The bed that Heidi pointed to had not been slept in yet. She handed him a bundle. He stared at it, not comprehending.

"Those are pajamas, Jonny," she said with a small laugh. "My husband's old pajamas. He'll have a fit when he comes home tonight and finds out I gave his pajamas to you." The day was done; she still smelled fresh and clean. She bent to him. For a brief, breathless moment, he thought that she would kiss him—as Baba used to do, a long, long time ago.

She did not do that, though. She covered him from head to toe with a fat feather comforter and, daintily, she made a little cushion for herself and perched there, like a bird.

"Are you too tired for a little talk?"

He shook his head. "Of course not. No."

Had she but asked to have his ears, he would have cut them off and handed them to her. Had she pined for the moon, he would have brought it down with silver arrows. Had he known how, he would have serenaded her; he would have put her on a pedestal and knelt before her, humbly.

"I'll pay you back," he told her, choked. "I will grow up and pay you back. I promise."

"You do not owe me anything," said Heidi seriously. "This is about moral perfection." She took a picture from the window sill and handed it to him. "Here. Do you know this man?"

He shook his head.

Her voice was shy and reverent. "We call him our Führer."

# Chapter 60

To this day, loving legends are told of Natasha. The best, perhaps, recalls how she went out and stole that special bin of grain so that there would yet be another yellow harvest.

You hear this story everywhere the clan of Apanlee has settled—in Mennotown, in Winnipeg, in Waterloo, in Reedley, in Vancouver. When oldsters tell it, haltingly, watch how the hair will rise on withered arms, much like a tiny forest.

"That was Natasha," they will say. "Ah, what a sturdy Baba. When she was young, she raised a lot of eyebrows. But when the Revolution came, why, she displayed a serpent's tongue. It hid a heart of gold."

Each morning, rain or shine, Natasha went to scavenge—a sly and cunning peasant who somehow hung onto her donkey cart, her proudest, still private possession. By a sheer miracle, she had procured it from an enormous pile of rubble in the ransacked neighborhood. Now she pulled it by two ropes the twins had slung across her shoulders.

"I will be back," she promised every time she disappeared.

And back she came, night after night, with something she had traded for, to help the clan survive.

Once, she was gone for several days. She wasn't lost, however. Home she came, staggering beneath a burlap sack. She said, collapsing by the fire: "Don't ask, and you won't know."

"You stole it!" cried Marleen, and quickly pulled the shutters.

"What? I confess to nothing," smiled Natasha, radiating pride, and it was plain that she enjoyed the stir. "Guess what you like. No one can stop you guessing."

Natasha's conscience didn't pinch her in the least. Her nerves no longer hung in tatters.

"Straight from the government bin? You'll be shot, you fool!"

"Who? Me?"

Natasha did not feel the least bit worse for watching Marleen work herself into a mighty funk. "Look here! It sat there, at the station, smoking from combustion. Could I help spotting it?" Her hands were cut and bleeding, but she was in fine form. "Ah, what a night! What opportunity! A pile of grain, in big fat sacks, unsupervised! Let all those riches go to waste?" She savored stretching the suspense, while Mimi and the twins pressed closer. "I couldn't resist. I stood between anvil and hammer."

"You didn't!"

"Did you really?"

"Natasha, no! My God!"

Natasha looked triumphant. "Surrounded by a bale of wire! Somebody had twisted it open already. Would I let such a stroke of luck pass by? Fail all my lucky icons? I made a fist and pushed it through. With pounding heart, I filled my apron. Here. Pinch my arm to know it's really me."

All pitted with pockmarks but shining with purpose, enjoying an immense—and growing—reputation: that was Natasha now, as useful and as capable as anyone they knew.

Sometimes, she went so far as to start bullying: "Where is my heated brick? Quick, get my footstool. Run!"

They loved her; they esteemed her; in fact, they needed

her—they couldn't do without her. Content with her station in life, she was serving the Germans, as always. Her heart was set on being useful, and it sang like a bird.

For weeks, Natasha preened herself before Marleen, whose nose was full of tears. Natasha made the most of it. She could not get enough of praise and recognition. The story grew and grew. She garnished and dressed up her pluck as word spread of her daring deed. Her tongue had a life of its own.

"There was this guard, this scoundrel, see? He tried, the rascal, to restrain me!" Perhaps Natasha should have felt ashamed for her un-Soviet deed, but Natasha had never felt happier—and never mind the famine cost her every tooth.

"I bit his hand. I bit it hard. He fled!"

She smiled as widely as she could, as often as she had a reason. What harm another little lie as long as it bought smiles? If she walked down the street, the German farmers stopped to chat. She basked in rays of glory; she could not get enough.

So let the village council visit her and tell her, frowningly, that it was now her solemn duty to hound the people's enemies, to help unmask destructive plots, to find a broom and sweep away corruption.

"It is a crime against the government," he said to her, "to violate the quota laws. On fear of punishment, the quotas must be kept."

To show she was a realist, she hummed the *"Internationale"*. It would not hurt, she told herself, to keep her ears wide open and keep her two feet firmly planted on the ground.

The twins paid her the finest compliments.

"We'll make it, thanks to you—" said Yuri many times, and Sasha added seamlessly: "—and to our dearest Lord."

"I know. I know. I just lucked out, was all."

"We'll have a new harvest," said Yuri, love shining from his eyes. "Had it not been for you—"

"The bitter days are gone!"

She watched them thoughtfully. She had hummed to them both in the cradle. They were a joy still, spare and thin, though filling out, developing some muscle. Thanks to the grain she stole for them, her faith in Apanlee and in the twins was of the deepest dye imaginable. She had high hopes for them.

But in the meantime, how to keep their stolen treasure from being plundered by the government before it had a chance to sprout? That took a lot of cunning.

With the help of the twins, Natasha conspired and plotted and schemed. The Pioneer lay face-down in her pillows, her fingers in her ears.

Marleen and Natasha were melting down the last two of Natasha's iron-ration candlesticks. In the dark of the night, they deftly sealed bottle by bottle. The moon shone bright and cold. The air was like a diamond.

Then came the prayers, by government decree forbidden yet proscribed:

"—Thou settleth our furrows—"

"—Thou maketh them soft with rich showers—"

"—as smoke is driven away, Thou driveth the devil away—"

"—let us rejoice exceedingly—"

She linked her hands with them. She lowered bottle after bottle into the waterhole the twins had hacked into the ice, but not before she tied a string to each and fastened the ends to a rock.

"—as in the olden days, oh Lord!"

"Be it Thy will! Fat crops!"

As long as there was seed, no one could destroy the seasons. No hoodlum could divert the force of spring. No government could stop a grain from pushing up toward the sun, come spring again, and summer. No slogan could improve the riches of the Bible, fatter than any other book.

Now stood Natasha solemnly within their prayer circle, an equal in the eyes man and God. She knew the Lord was on their side. No mind the missing psalter words the hooligans had torn

away—she knew them all by heart. She trusted them. She knew the German farmers' hearts beat hard with Faith and certainty, as bottle after bottle sank down beneath the murky waters, beside the age-old oak—a little to the left, where, in the bygone days when serfs were serfs and masters, masters, the Elder Willy used to baptize marriageable couples to keep the progeny within the ethnic fold.

Marleen sold on the thriving black market what little the new Soviet leaders allowed her to grow. She sold cucumbers, beans, tomatoes. She raised and sold a goat. She still owned six decrepit chickens whose eggs Natasha traded for a spool of thread with which to mend a jacket, a piece of string with which to tie a sole.

These days, Natasha wore Hein's boots with nonchalance. They were too large and rubbed at the heel; therefore, she tied some string around the tips to keep the soles from flapping.

Natasha proved to be an arduous ally. She was a recognized authority on queues. She went out early every morning and came home late at night. When everybody else at Apanlee gave up, Natasha stood in lines, right through the muddy season.

Sometimes the others heckled her: "Still serving the exploiters?"

"Why, I have nothing else to do. So what?"

"You'll learn. You'll learn," they sneered.

Natasha only shrugged. The Soviet bureaucrats wrote brand new laws in bold red ink, but she paid no attention. Nobody had Natasha's patience in spotting bargains as she did, outlasting rain and cold. She knew that if she waited long enough—if luck was on her side!—fine items could be traded for, with items from the past.

She traded off from Apanlee whatever she could find; she carted off to Apanlee whatever she could hoard, heaving hard with triumph and exertion, tramping through the falling snow.

Was anybody craftier?

Sometimes Natasha spoke her mind; she was an equal now.

As often as the opportunity arose, she launched herself into a heated argument to round out the rest of the day. She clung to her opinions with tenacity. She stamped her feet with rage.

"Let bygones be bygones!" she shouted. "He who stops, rusts! That's what I always say!"

Natasha still believed that it was true that he who stopped would rust, as she had done for altogether different reasons before the old life toppled in the streets and sprawled into the gutter.

She had horse-sense, and brawn, and copious spit, as well as proverbs by the bushel. She repeated them often, between clenched teeth, as she swept from the sidewalk the glass shards of the Glorious Revolution.

"Why keep your head right in the lion's mouth?" the field inspectors countered, taunting her. "Why not, instead, help usher in the future?"

Natasha lacked the words to find an apt reply. She was a simple woman. "Just leave me be!" she barked. "Every day has a sunrise and sunset."

Deep down, she had her reasons. She kept Marleen in the corner of her eye. A small geranium, red and sassy, blazed on the window sill, out to the west, that no one dared to touch. Marleen was tending it.

The twins survived, two somber men with burning eyes and hungry hearts, whose daily task it was to concentrate their energy to help the land renew, and to beseech the Lord to let them live so they could carry on the double task of piety and propagation.

"Which one of us?" they asked. Between them stood Larissa.

Each night they climbed the ladder to pull the Bible from the straw. Sometimes the Pioneer, whose German name was Mimi Neufeld, would watch them, sitting on some half-charred girders, knees drawn tautly to her chin. She liked to sit like that, close to the twins, for reasons only dimly understood, yet deeply felt within, where things were warm and soft and painfully for-

bidden. Her brothers did not think it odd to ask the Holy Spirit to help enlighten them. She watched how they devoured the Gospel, a bourgeois fairytale.

"The spirit of Lenin, the spirit of Stalin suffice," she corrected them gently, but she was small, not yet ten years of age, and hence indulgently ignored. When Yuri stroked her hair, when Sasha told her of the Holy Spirit, the Pioneer, in training for the Soviet future, grew goose bumps on her spine.

Yet, day by day and week by week, she sat with other children of her age in four neat rows, three to a desk, discussing how torture, deftly applied, could unmask the prayerful Germans.

"Now find a synonym for Faith."

"Superstition! Superstition!" shouted all the gutter children. They shouted with such lustiness that Lenin's bust leapt on the window sill.

Their teacher smiled with glee, small bubbles forming in the corners of her mouth. "The Bible? Answer me!"

All eyes were riveted on Mimi. If there was laughter, chances were it was at her expense. She had no choice at all. She said as firmly as she could: "Slime! Filth! All Bible stories, just a pack of lies."

She took top honors in her class for an entire year. She knew that she would never be possessed by that brand of deception. All that was yesterday! The future was tomorrow!

She still had years to grow.

Thus was a young girl caught between the twins, on one side, and the demanding doctrine of the Party, on the other. She walked on stilts eternally. She tried to sit between two chairs. If she reported what she knew, the Party smiled on her. If she kept secrets from the Party, she felt the tongues of guilt.

She tried to please both sides without surrendering. She felt as though she had two eyes of different colors—depending on which eye she closed, that's how her world appeared.

"Faith can't be trusted. Ever!" said the teacher, and put an-

other star beside her name, to signify her growth in Party doctrine. "To be of use to us, you have to be on guard."

"Trust in the Lord," her brothers said, and put warm hands upon her wind-blown face, "and nothing will befall you."

"Make up your mind," the teacher told her daily. "You cannot please both sides."

"Now fold your little hands. Give thanks to your Lord and Provider—"

She did so, furtively, her two eyes darting left and right, still hoping against hope the Holy Ghost would come, just as her brothers claimed, and give her peace and certainty and fill her aching heart. And since that didn't happen—hope as she might, wait as she did, all but on tiptoes, verily!—she slammed the door behind her.

She was not burdened, as her brothers were, with surplus sentiment of gratitude to God because she had been spared. She knew she had to live. For life, one had to pay.

Here's what she saw, a hardened and cynical youngster: Some lived—but many, many died. She did not link one faulty notion with another.

And so she stood before the class and pledged: "If I hear someone pray, I will report that crime."

She knew it would sadden her God-fearing brothers, that expedient little lie, but the treacherous words just jumped from her tongue. She had been spared, and she knew why: the Party needed her. If one put duty before pleasure, the end result was worth.

These things were done to little children as Stalin did away with Faith to launch the New World Order. Against the backdrop of the past, that dictum was not difficult to see for youngsters such as Mimi: Faith was a tool meant to deceive and dupe; Faith was the obstacle that stunted thought. She wanted none of that.

Faith warped the mind and slowed down reason, she told herself repeatedly, while climbing up into the attic to watch her brothers pray. She could not stay away. She knew she was duplicitous. Not even a pup would be licking her nose. She was a proud and confirmed non-believer. God was a myth, for science had

unmasked the scams of yesterday with the triumphant Revolution. Forward-looking citizens of the progressive Soviet Union discarded such fables for good. She did not need the murky Faith of yesterday.

She did, however, need to be comforted. Her brothers had caressing hands. They smelled of earth and hay. When Sasha said to her: "Come join our prayer circle, darling," she melted. When Yuri coaxed: "Here, little love. Here is my lap. Curl up!" her nose commenced to drip with sentiment.

What was a child to do? She sat between them, modestly. If she could manage to forget the twins and their incessant prayers, her future lay before her, like hills in a blue haze. If, on the other hand, she did as she was told by them, the likely end was grim.

"Thou maketh lightning for the rain—"

"Thou maketh wind out of Thy treasures—"

Sasha's prayers blazed like flaming torches, but Yuri's prayers! Yuri's prayers! They flowed like seasoned wine.

"No evil shall befall you, darling," whispered Yuri. "For He shall give his angels charge over you—" She shuddered at the force of their whispering voices, before the task they had set for themselves.

Softly, her mind began to wander. To Mimi, the Gospel meant naught. She barely recalled celebrating Sundays, Christmas, or Easter holidays with prayers—comforting, happy times now swept away with brand new brooms the Revolution had supplied.

Forever! was the boast.

Her glance went through the window, furtively—and when she saw a shadow move, she felt her tongue go dry.

# Chapter 61

In Mennotown, the Hebrew grain and cattle buyers came and went, periodically, as did the winter relatives. Brick was in keeping with your station. Wheat, barley, peas, oats, rye, and cucumbers in season were in keeping with your instincts. Moderation in all matters was in keeping with your reputation—you didn't treat your verandah to curves. If you were worth a housewife's salt, you kept a modicum of secrecy around your recipes.

It was a placid time. The Lord was good. The wheat stood rich and lush. When it rained, you slept into the day. When the sun came out again, you pruned your cherry trees.

Perhaps you planted yet another orchard. You watched the food rise from the soil or hang in clusters from the branches, and there was glory in your belly and your soul.

No matter where you looked, everyone was linked by kinship, and everything was orderly. The tailor tailored shirts. The mailman brought the mail. The chairman had a chair.

Doctorjay had many friends in Wichita where, lately, formality was now a habit of the past. Most people had a nickname, preferably one-syllable. He was on courteous terms with all—

even progressive folks such as the Finkelsteins who walked through Wichita in long, aggressive strides with arms about each other.

Sometimes, he joined and talked. Sometimes, they did the same.

With Noralee now dead and gone, he felt as if an engine had uncoupled from a train and, Prohibition in full force, the bars of Wichita were hidden well behind facades. Not that that stopped the healer. He had his inner maps. They steered him faithfully. He knew that Little Melly had discriminating nostrils, and what she smelled when he came home, she did not like one bit. In fact, she nearly had a fit each time he came home singing.

Little Melly could smell a Jack Daniels from afar, just as she could predict, from the aroma of Josie's scent jars, that she was heading off to Wichita again to visit with the Finkelsteins in open-air cafes.

One topic of discussion there remained the wonders of the Marxist Revolution. Now, voices lowered guardedly, the Hebrews started talking about the exploitation of the masses here at home. Their one absorbing interest was now the Labor Union.

The healer drank to that.

That was his way of making cheer. He missed his Noralee. To forestall lonesomeness, the bottle filled with fire water was always within reach.

Doctorjay was imbibing again. He drank to the most obscure elections. He toasted the Catholic Pope. It was cheers to good health, to good-byes. He toasted Lizzy's sauerkraut. He toasted her *vareniki.* He did general toasts, specific toasts, and even toasted several quasi-anarchists, although by accident.

He kept slapping his thighs with delight.

Before another year was gone, he drank to absolutely everything. He toasted the sunshine; he toasted the rain. He toasted Carrie Nation! He even toasted Lucky Lindbergh, a rising star and just about as close to perfect as they come, although the Hebrews had their doubts and spoke about them openly.

Here was a national celebrity on account of his air ship endeavors, still of enormous interest to Jan. Was Lindbergh, thus, a genuine patriot and four-square for equality? Or was he flirting with the Right and, hence, a man of perfidy?

That's what the Hebrews asked.

"We'll never meet this young again!" the healer cried, embracing the trunk of a tree. He was a Lutheran and, therefore, unrestrained.

Once, when he spotted Abigail returning home from Wichita—where she had gone to see a judge to help explain to him why her two youngest sons had managed to disturb the peace by shouting union slogans through a loudspeaker—he followed her, determined.

"Abigail! Say, Abigail! Wearing out a brand new pair of shoes?"

"You can say that again."

He leaned across his flivver door to get a better view. "What's going on? Why are you all spruced up?"

"What do you want from me? " asked Abigail. "A glass of sugar water?"

She talked like that, in question marks. She was a tease; she had a feline malice that gave him pleasant jolts. This meeting happened on the day the sparrows started feasting freely on the peaches, pears and plums on trees his now-departed Noralee imported many years ago from Apanlee.

Black galoshes glistening in the sunshine, Doctorjay decided to go check how Abigail's cucumbers were growing, right after a good rain. His household was in tears, but all was light and air within his fleshy heart. He was toasting the Army. The Navy.

He shouted when he spotted her: "How are you, Abigail?"

"Much better than can be expected."

Her hour glass figure was long gone, but on the other hand, she had no bony corners. She had a round behind and a face that was dusted with sun spots. She wore her hat on her left side. She wiped her lips with the back of her hand. "What's on your

mind? I'd like to know. Precisely."

He chuckled happily into his double chin. No fly could ruin his appetite.

"Spare me," cried Abigail, but with a knowing smile. "Why, you old sinner, you!"

No one tracked sinners like Dewey, right into the heart of a Catholic stronghold. By this time Dewey, too, was getting on in years, but he was still his old and eager self. He saw no choice. He had to act. He knew that it was now or never.

"It's now or never, folks," he said, a master at the close.

The preachers in his family had come and gone, all undiminished. Dewey could have long ago retired pleasantly, leaving someone else tend the vineyard of the Lord, but who dared even hint to Dewey Epp about retirement?

Besides, there still was Archibald, to lend a hand as needed. Archie had precisely what it took to keep the members of his congregation on the straight-and-narrow path: he hammered at their sins as though he shooed a horse.

The Great War had ended a decade before, but for Archie, the war was not over. He still collected every week to help the orphans and the amputees. He still went house-to-house, collecting for the war graves. "All in the name of Christ," said Archie, a bit shrill.

He knew, as Lizzy did, that Faith grew best in graveyards, and who could prove him wrong? For weeks on end, each afternoon, he went to visit folks. Tea was at four, supper at eight. At the heart of all talk was the Savior.

Modernity, preached Dewey Epp, one eye on Josephine and one on Doctorjay, was still a Serious Social Problem.

The neighborhood agreed. The Donoghues claimed, wantonly, they were entitled meat for breakfast, lunch and dinner. They wanted longer holidays. Their eyes were glued to those reformers whose speeches ended in a question mark, who looked for allies everywhere to strengthen their own ranks.

A case in point: Jan's Josie.

She still bought things she could have made herself from portly Jewish merchants down on Second Street. She still shunned the heart of a picnic. She absolutely didn't do what every other woman of her status did to keep herself informed: push back her curtains and her flower pots to get a better look at what was going on with Abigail and Mennotown's determined healer.

Ah! Life in Mennotown, where gossip was the beam of scrutiny! No matter how dark or how cluttered a closet—in a roundabout way, you found out!

Lizzy would have liked to have relied on Josephine to keep her gossip up to date, now that her legs had given out, but Josie, looking fit to be a queen, albeit full of tiny wrinkles, had scarcely time for that.

"It's all about the liberation of humanity," chimed Josephine, at last recovering.

Once more, she dressed herself in rainbow hues, preferring fiery red. Reverting to her former self, she spoke poetically of this and that, chiefly of social justice—this time at home, right in her neighborhood. Whatever she did, she did exceedingly well, but she didn't draw back her hair in a bun, and she didn't share gossip she heard.

She arched her brows. She was like a cat. Softly purring.

In Wichita, she kept all sorts of friends of every kind and hue. She introduced them everywhere and even brought them home at supper time, without announcing it, instead of giving Lizzy time to find out for herself whom she might want to know.

She burst into loud laughter when salient tidbits about the twosome's budding romance came her way. "What? Doctorjay and Abigail? Whatever gave you that idea? You've got to be pulling my leg."

Gossip was useful, sniffed Lizzy, offended. As good as rich milk, still warm from the cow. Lizzy proffered her own point of view for Josie to consider—after all, was Doctorjay not family? He needed to be warned.

"Why wait? Why not find out before it is too late and give him useful hints?"

"So what if he likes Abigail? It's none of our business."

"It's good to keep yourself informed to forestall worse to come. Just sound him out a bit. And let me know so I can tell the neighbors."

"He's a grown man, entitled to his privacy."

"But if you live in Chinatown, you bow. She isn't one of us. She isn't orderly."

"But do I live in Chinatown?" was Josie's deft reply.

*Ach!* What to do? Old Lizzy relished sorting out romantic details before she spread them to her neighbors, but to get Josie to sit still for gossip about Abigail and Doctorjay for any length of time was as hard as unloading a cartful of piglets.

At first, Abigail pretended Doctorjay did not exist for her, but not for long. She relented and planted a kiss on his pate.

"You wouldn't want to waste your life," teased Abigail. With those words, she embedded herself in his heart.

He nearly burst with sentiment. His heart had lost its gallop but nothing of its warmth. Old age was as light as a feather.

"Just wait and see," said he, replying instantly, returning a resounding smack.

"You shouldn't have," squirmed Abigail, and toyed with the bands of her hat. She whispered her romantic wish list; he gave her a poke with his elbow; he had a peacock's pride. Returning home, he had to pause at least five times to wipe his eyes, he was that overcome.

"To the kaiser in exile!" he shouted.

In weeks to come, Abigail gave Doctorjay a lot of long and curious stares. She knew her powers well. She read him like a book. His temples throbbed with May.

They eyed each other carefully, from every single angle, and found each other fit. In a village where nothing was private, soon it was known that Doctorjay had made himself a frenzied fool who polished his belt buckle. Poor Noralee, revolving in

her grave!

Old Lizzy was incredulous. In memory of Noralee, whose big and noisy sobs were legend, she kept wiping her eyes with her apron.

"How could you, Doctorjay? What's this I hear? For practically fifty years, you walked with Noralee in harmony. Now this?"

He was the world's worst liar. "Whatever do you mean?"

"What do we know about the Donoghues? The papers call them elements, prefixed by undesirable."

Weeds to their knees! Flies on their ceiling like sesame seeds on a bun! Not that that mattered to the geezer. "I'm not yet feeling sluggish. She has a round derriere—"

"And you, in your old age!" gasped Lizzy.

In fact, she gasped twice and had to sit down, while Doctorjay hooted and couldn't stop laughing: "What's that? Are you claiming I'm over the hill?"

"Just where is it going to end? You'll be the laughingstock of Mennotown before the year is out. Her noodles swim in grease—"

All that fell upon stony ground. All that occasioned only shrugs. The healer showed no signs of cracking. He even spurned the timid tailor's widow whom Lizzy pushed into his path, to forestall worse to come. Instead, he dug a pointed elbow into Little Melly's ribs and needled her for days: "Stay home? With weather fit for love?" The more she argued with his choice, the wilder he became. He was enjoying his own jokes, and Abigail was one of them. He aimed his flivver down the nearest street, his flask inside, snug in a leather pouch, while taking corners, tires screeching, air horn blowing, spraying behind him large fountains of dirt.

He went to visit Abigail each day, his straw hat full of apples, five hairs fluffed up on top. The summer was still winding down when Abigail agreed: "I do. I will. What else is there to do?"

He wore his shiniest trousers for the wedding, for Abigail

had costly tastes not only for herself. "I miss the matrimonial warmth," he said, and marched his Abigail right into Dewey's German church and married her, for better or for worse.

Jan's daughters, on the other hand, of a younger generation, were not at all alarmed. They were a jolly lot, like leafy and well-rooted plants, who drove each other into fits of laughter when they watched Doctorjay salute another tree.

"He claims he saw a Zeppelin," they screeched while collapsing with mirth and elation.

Such joy, to share in a gossipy windfall!

Fine quilts and fluffy pillows everywhere, that was their happiness. Each one of them was dutiful and punctual, more than content to stay within the bosom of their kin. When it came time for them to take a husband, these maidens had no trouble finding nice and solid citizens of proven German stock. Their wheat stood tall; their cows' tails switched away the flies. Before the decade ran its course, all six except the youngest were married well and gone from Jan's and Josie's home except for visits on the holidays. The youngest was still making up her mind between assorted suitors.

"My zwieback, like the foamy sea," she bragged to them, and to the neighborhood, and that was poetry.

Lizzy was very proud of them but kept her feelings to herself, for fear of showing vanity. Jan's daughters were her joy. The little fellow stole her heart, however, and never gave it back.

When Rarey won first prize for doodling, his mother combed her hair with individuality in a decided sweep. Photographs show Josie ravishing way into middle age.

One of her refrains ran: "He'll be a first-class artist." Josie parted her hair on her left, while most matrons wore parts in the middle.

Since she had modified herself, however, in more important ways, this was a small concession. Her appetite was better now: she scarcely left a crumb. Growing plump and rosy over time

made for a more complacent disposition. Rare flashes of the younger Josie were dismissed. No matter that she still cavorted with the Finkelsteins! As long as Josie took her turns in brewing coffee in the basement of the church where Archie kidded with the volunteers with such enormous verve and energy that spittle flew in sparks, all was not lost! There was still mileage left.

"Repent! Repent!" was Archie's battle cry.

Most did; she didn't; but you could only push Josie so far.

She never quite became the middle-of-the-roader that everybody wanted her to be. She lived with books; she lived for books—and treated them like people.

And she taught Rarey likewise.

Maps. File folders. Binders. Pens. Pencils. Notebooks and looseleafs galore. There was no end to it.

She bought him a globe, she bought him a microscope, she bought him leather-bound encyclopedias. Before Rarey even started school, the shrimpkin was a fluent reader.

"Too good for this world," said the neighbors.

Modernity was moving in on Mennotown as well; artistic children were the rage; crowds gathered around Rarey to admire. His drawings were passed on from hand to hand and hung in people's parlors. So proud was Jan of his small son and his exceptionality he practically did somersaults, and Josie was beside herself each time her last-born finished yet another sketch.

This youngster, their familial train's caboose—a perfect progeny in every way, without a single birth mark, although not made for football—was destined to change everything. Or so old Lizzy's hopes.

"Why, he can have as many brushes as he wants, plus several extra sets," bragged Josie. No one checked on how many she bought. She never made apologies for doodles.

Deep in her soul, she nursed ambitious plans for Rarey. This child, whose origin still loomed as though it were a stony mountain whose tip was shrouded in white fog, showed early signs of

independent judgment—this long before he shed his baby teeth.

Josie smiled with approbation, silently watching him. She watched him with a focused, strange intensity. It was as if the talents of her daughters didn't count.

Let all those blinkered people plod to church on their flat feet, in rolled-up socks, and then plod home again to homemade noodles! She knew that Rarey would succeed where she had tried and failed.

He did not have his mother's prickliness, her acid anger, her rebellious thoughts. He was her compromise. And yet, he had inherited complexity: that was her gift to him. He shared her love for well-wrought poetry. For symmetry. For silence. This little fellow was the best that she and Jan had managed to bring forth. He was her flesh and blood. He had her hair. Her skin. Her shimmering sheen of eye.

But he was also different: accommodating, yielding.

"Come. Sit here by the window," said Josie, softening, when she saw hurt wash over Lizzy's face for a rebuff she had not meant to slip across her lips.

"Sure. Sure. Why not?"

Old Lizzy peered at Josie, squinting. She was entitled to some rest. Well over eighty, she could no longer feel her fingers or her toes. Her eyes were dim; not even glasses helped.

"If you don't mind my saying so, you're overdoing it."

"Whatever do you mean?"

Old Lizzy bit her lip. Her heart just melted at the sight of little Rarey. She felt pride, too, mixed with vexation. No doubt a lovely little treasure, his chin cupped in his hands, a favorite with everyone, the hub of his adoring family—but why a telescope sent all the way from Washington? Why not leave well enough alone? Why clutter up his mind?

Old Lizzy fussed and squirmed. She had a silent battle with herself before she gave vent to her worry.

"Say. Please forgive me, Josephine. His reading doesn't give him headaches?"

"That theory," said Josie similingly without the slightest rancor, tucking a hand-stitched quilt around Old Lizzy's knees, "went down the day the *Lusitania* was sunk."

"He takes after you?"

"I guess so. And why not?"

"None of your girls took after you."

"No, Lizzy dear, they all took after you," acknowledged Josie peacefully, and let the matter drop.

And she was right. All Jan's daughters were alike in looks and manners and demeanor, as though they all had been cut carefully from Lizzy's cookie cutter.

# Chapter 62

Marleen grew silent and subdued when she was told that she must now work hard to meet her quota yield.

"Set an example as a model citizen," the quota agents told her.

How to accomplish that? The masses that had howled the *Internationale* now chafed in mines and factories. It was hard to find hands for the harvest.

"Our little father Stalin," the snoopers said, "is clicking glasses with the humblest citizens of the Soviet, toasting peace and friendship with his workers. We expect you to show proper faith in his genius."

All that was written in her Bible: she knew exactly where. The Gospel of her forebears instructed her precisely how she must render unto Caesar. It also told her she must render unto God.

She struck a middle road. The quota rules were merciless, she soon discovered, but the Germans were bred to obedience; they did as they were told; they shared all that was safe to share, and quietly withheld the rest.

"I'll do my best," she therefore promised solemnly, and did

not tell the agents of the gherkin patch behind the chicken coop, well hidden from the eye.

She did not think that wrong. She saw no need to blush. She had lived to witness renewal. Her babies had sprinkled the road with their blood.

Marleen grew potatoes, onions, watermelons, sugar beets and cucumbers on the secret plot behind the hen house, well-hidden behind some boards. The food the plot produced was grown in stark defiance of the law. It helped her and her family to make it through another bitter winter. The frost sat on the cherry trees. For months on end, the snow lay on the hedges.

When finally the sun came out, a well-known Party deputy arrived at Apanlee and started asking ticklish questions. He shouted himself hoarse.

"We know it all! You can't hide anything!"

He kept searching the building from the eaves to the cellar, and when he was finished, he started again.

"Well, are you all through now?" asked the little Pioneer, hoping to bewilder him with clever diverting maneuvers.

The agent stepped around her and started fumbling with a lock. "What's this? A trap door? Huh? What are you traitors hiding?"

The Pioneer said airily: "*Kapusta.* That is all." Her flanks heaved with distress as though she were a foal, but she controlled herself. She knew the bucket had a double bottom; she quickly sat on it. She knew inside the double-bottom bucket were coins her brothers had set aside to pay for a small plow.

She was cunning past her years. She smiled her brightest smile, and gave the Pioneer salute. "Now that you haven't found a thing, why not report our innocence?"

"Ha! Sauerkraut! You are found out. What else? Potatoes? Young potatoes?"

She did not argue back. He was already opening the cellar door to find the brine that bathed the precious food grown from Larissa's secret cabbage patch. She tried to look angelic.

"Oh, nothing much. Not much at all. See for yourself. But be forewarned. Down in that hole are lots of big, fat spiders—"

"You profiteers," the agent spat, "are worst of all. The scum of the earth! Traitors, all of you! Saboteurs! Counter-Revolutionaries. Just vermin. All of you. Just vermin."

He kept abusing her until he grew tired of her. She sat there, and she smiled.

At Apanlee, a foolish sentiment prevailed: the government leaves you alone if you leave it alone. She knew that that was incorrect politically. There was no doubt in Mimi's heart of their collective guilt. She knew her mother and her brothers were obedient citizens; she also knew that they were hoarding, desperately.

Worse yet, and much more dangerous: at the Pioneer club, several friends hinted slyly that they knew.

The meddlers and kibitzers didn't go away, though even Natasha made herself as smooth and pleasant and agreeable as possible. She learned to nod with vigor to what the agents said, while keeping her opinions to herself.

She did not marshal ammunition with which to meet the argument that it was more efficient now to milk a cow with a machine; that a plain box, if wired right, could hatch an egg as well as any broody hen. Let any fool believe that!

The principles the Party spawned to pauperize the rich were of the loftiest kind—in practice getting there from here was different. The agents' homilies were convoluted. Reality was plain. You needed fodder for the cow. You needed rye and barley for the chickens. These all had to be grown.

Her reasoning went thus: The people knowing every secret as to how to raise the grain crop needed to restore the herds and flocks of fowl had to be practiced farmers, experienced at coaxing the seed. The clan shared all this knowledge; the twins knew every secret.

Yet plowing, hoeing, digging - except in service to the state - were now considered felonies. This made the twins near mad.

Natasha knew they cocked their ears toward the soil as though it were a living, breathing thing that needed to be treated with respect, esteem, and courtesy. The twins were mum about their plans, but she had eyes to see; she saw that spring drew them to their acres like a magnet.

Natasha cast an extra cunning look and saw that they were optimistic for themselves and venturesome on how to turn the tide. Though good workers were hard to come by, the twins had still hope for the seed. Once buried, the kernels would grow.

Natasha backed their hope at every opportunity. It was unthinkable that they should fail the land. It had sustained the family for five abundant generations; chances were it would again. There was no room for any other sentiment. The string of sparkling spring days following the latest agents' raid was like a rich and heady wine.

"You! Vermin! Scum!" the next one sneered, while trampling down the lush geraniums that cleverly hid five tomato plants. "Why not pool strength in a commune? Why work for selfish gain?"

At that, a spring gave out. Natasha was shrieking, a woman possessed: "I'll scratch your eyes out, you!"

Her shrieks did not intimidate the lout. It only brought the neighbors running.

The agent hectored them while climbing on a chair. "We live in challenging times! The old rules no longer apply!"

Her eyes misted over. The old rules were gone; the wind blew them down.

But here is what she saw, as clearly as though written in bold ink: the earth had its own mandate. The past was still the past, but the abused and plundered clan was slowly moving back into the well-worn ruts they knew so well before the Romanovs had lost their lives and throne.

Thus, while the struggle for survival still was grim, the looming question mark seemed gone. Endurance had won out. The sun was out again; the Germans started spading.

No longer thin as hay rakes, thin to the point of vanishing, the twins were filling out. Their shoulders started widening. Each morning, Natasha pinched their muscles. Each night they climbed the ladder to leaf through the Gospel and pray.

"The girl? The church? We'll have to split our duties."

Larissa kept pulling her apron for answers. "Even a turtle must stick out its neck," she said in the end, producing a very small dimple.

"Why two of you? What is a girl to do?"

"Look at this pretty girl. Everything is carrot red—"

"—her hair—"

"—her eyebrows—"

"—her lashes—"

"—her freckles—"

Marleen, too, caught her breath in awe. Here was a young woman of prim, tidy habits, suitably modest, taking the string bag, patiently waiting in queues. She ironed her bed sheets both sides. She knew how to darn with precision. She practiced her loops with an eye to the shortage of yarn. What better evidence that they'd exist in harmony? They shared each other's values.

She, too, saw the girl through mist in her eyes: a chance seed, brought on by the wind.

When Marleen saw the youngster standing in the wind-blown halls of Apanlee that dark, raw November morning—trembling, hungry, numb with cold, and blinded by the whirling flakes of snow—and saw her sons gaze at the ragged visitor in wonder, that's when a mother knew, deep in her wounded heart: "They're still intact, the ancient laws of love."

The twins had surrendered their male drive to famine, but now it stirred anew; Larissa stood by smiling.

"I came to claim kinship," she said.

"Here is your apron, dear," Marleen said to the willing girl. "Now go and help Natasha in the kitchen."

Larissa, for her part, did not waste words herself.

"Help me decide. Which one?"

"The fitting thing," Marleen replied, "is for the human heart to let the Lord decide."

Her answer was pleasing to all. Who else but the good Lord, intent on propagation, had steered Larissa stealthily through all the ice and snow to kindle the anemic blood of the two heirs of Apanlee? All credit be the Lord's.

That was the sentiment. Marleen knew then and there that those who had been spared would live, that she would live to see the coming of a future generation, and that the year to come would bring a measure of relief.

In the following weeks, Larissa spoke to several neighbors without prompting. Her claim was this: she could not take her heart away from one to give it to the other. Her mind was in a muddle.

"Why are there two of them? Alike?"

The neighbors had a ready answer. "What else are prayers for?"

But they made sure as well that no one heard such sacrilege against the leadership of the Soviet which had outlawed the Lord.

The twins stepped up their efforts, their voices growing husky with emotion. They tossed a windfall apple. Larissa reached for it. They held it, teasingly, just out of reach, to coax that distant smile.

A pale pink seeped into her young and fragile face. "You're so alike. How is a girl to know?"

Their glances were like water running through her toes. Their thoughts! The coals of junipers.

"The Lord will choose," they told her, quick as lightning.

She nodded, satisfied. She was a willing pupil. She kept them waiting, hoping, while both kept courting her with ardent constancy to help her heart decide.

The day came when Larissa flung her braids. Her heart swam with the scent of the acacias. She closed her eyes and started drifting. The sun streamed golden ribbons. Deep in the meadows, in the damp, five fragrant violets grew.

" Yuri? Sasha? Yuri? Sasha?" she said to Mimi next, who was, by then, just weeks away from leadership in the coveted Komsomol, the next step up the Party ladder.

"What do you mean?"

"There's two of them. What is a girl to do?"

The Pioneer was jealous of Larissa, who walked between the twins along the twisting goose path. "I don't want to torment myself with that riddle. Don't ask me. Ask Natasha. She knows them best. She cuddled them. She swaddled them. She put them on the potty."

"Which one?" Larissa asked Natasha. "You always boast how you can tell the two apart. So. Why be modest now?"

Natasha's heart swelled up like a balloon. Her face shone bright as Easter. "What's that? You ask an old donkey like me?" With red, raw hands she counted on her fingers: "Yuri. Sasha. Yuri. Sasha."

Larissa's face grew pink. Her moves became quick, impulsive. "Speak up. They are identical. I can't make up my mind."

Natasha had a high opinion of herself. The sun tugged at her heartstrings. There were shimmering beams in her soul. Gone were the days when all the gutters ran with blood. Her raspy voice turned motherly:

"Just take your time, my little love. Those two won't run away."

Larissa knew the worth of modesty: "I have my faults."

"What faults?" Natasha felt expansive. "Did I hear faults?" Had the choice been up to her, Natasha would have said: "It's Yuri. Definitely Yuri." He was the gentler twin. She wet her middle finger with her tongue and stroked across Larissa's brows to make them dark and shiny. "Just take your time. There really is no rush."

Unbidden memories came in a flood. She knew precisely why she favored Yuri over Sasha. He was his father's replica—blond, burly, stalwart, strong—but with his honor still intact. He had a lively mind, a genial nature and a ferocious appetite for spring. Hugging the earth with his manhood and youth, that was Yuri.

It was far from decided, however.

Once Larissa stepped on a rusty nail; Sasha put his lips around the puncture to draw the poison out. She said to him, her eyes on his bent head: "Why two of you?"

"The day will come when I will ask to kiss your cheek," he ventured in a bold endeavor. "Here is a daisy, girl. Let's see. She loves me, or she loves me not? Let's let the petals tell—"

She saw his face was red. She saw smoke curling from his eyes.

She started stammering. "Please, no. You frighten me."

When Sasha looked at her like that, Larissa felt as though she missed her footing. By contrast, every feeling Yuri stirred in her was deep and powerful and sweet.

His love for her was like a rainbow mounted on black marble, while Sasha's eyes shone with an inner fever, not gleaming evenly as Yuri's did, much like the sun that shone in May.

She was fond of them both, but Natasha was right: she tilted a bit toward Yuri.

"Well, think about it. Will you?"

Larissa thought of nothing else as she hung out her towels to dry.

Natasha's deepest needs were rooted in the nursery, now empty for too many years. There she attacked the spider webs, in her time off, just to be sure, as she had always done.

The twins were men. They had a girl. In good time, there would be another baby.

That baby had to have a lap, two arms, a lullaby. So ran Natasha's argument.

She resumed some of her boisterous ways. "Run, Mimi! Run! Put on the kettle for some tea to warm your silly Baba!"

She bullied everybody shamelessly. What need had she for centrally decreed equality? She was content with her station in life. The Party added nothing to her stature.

Natasha rose before the sun was up to shove herself into another queue, her heart set on a special deal; whatever might be

sold was of no consequence to her; a bargain was a bargain. She knew the clan could use most anything—why not get busy now? Natasha stepped in line and waited, patiently, while trembling in her threadbare overcoat, a discard of Marleen's but still with some life left. She bargained long and hard, stretching Marleen's last kopeck.

The government inspectors of the nascent Soviet state arrived repeatedly.

"Say! Do you know of anyone in your vicinity who could be called a traitor?" They taunted endlessly. Natasha watched as they rolled flint after flint into new cigarettes, lit them with testy fingers and stubbed them out on the old German portraits that still hung in the halls of Apanlee.

Their questions never varied.

Who was maliciously withholding corn needed to feed the workers in the city factories?

Who was intent on undermining Party goals?

Who was involved in sabotage against the reconstructive efforts of the nation?

The answers grew louder and louder.

The counter-Revolutionaries. The nation's enemies. The foreigners. The kulaks. The restive, recalcitrant Germans.

"You! Little Citizens! Speak up and answer boldly," the teacher told the class. "Who's hiding surplus food?"

"I know no one that wicked and corrupt," lied Mimi, cunning past her years. If she withheld her information, what would the Party say? If she reported what she knew, what would they eat tomorrow?

She stared out of the window. The wind outside was tormenting the trees. Rumors were rife there would soon be a village-wide, house-to-house search.

Now it was spring again and time to seed; the land had already been furrowed. If she reported that the twins were plotting on the sly to seed so as to harvest for themselves, she sacrificed the family. If she refused to sacrifice the family, she sacrificed herself.

"Now, little Citizen. Stand up and speak the truth," the teacher demanded, loath to let go. "Who is filling his belly with government food?"

"If I knew that," she muttered, miserably, "I would run to report it at once."

The children stared, two with their mouths wide open. The teacher hovered close. "Your conscience twinges, Citizen?"

She shrank back in her seat. Last night, when all the family had joined around the supper table, the curtains had been drawn. Had anyone peeked in? Bright color streamed into her face. She muttered wretchedly: "I cannot imagine such treason—"

"You'd better not—" the teacher said. She knew how to punish, and did.

For weeks on end, the teacher fixed her eye on Mimi and and watched for any slip.

"Some of you merit Party scholarships," the teacher told her, probing for her underbelly. "Is there a secret that you have to share? Do you need to confide?"

The youngster shook her head while finishing an apple core to show her nonchalance. At every opportunity, she struck a docile stance. She didn't care to have the German taint; the task was to outfox the teacher.

"Think hard. Who still prays to a non-existent God for extra, unearned favors?"

She shook her head. She felt like a pin cushion; the teacher kept sticking sharp needles into her.

"I don't know anyone."

Her brothers prayed. Her mother prayed. Larissa prayed. *Ach Gott!*

"Who grovels still before a silly icon?"

Her Baba did! Natasha! Natasha never ate the smallest morsel without crossing herself with three fingers. The candles for Natasha's icons were long gone, but still she spoiled her saints. She was incorrigible. She covered her dilapidated saints with bits of discard cloth to overwhelm them with attention, and to

protect them from destructive dust. But tell the teacher that?

"And who is sabotaging wickedly the reconstructive efforts of our Soviet Motherland?"

The twins! She knew they had hidden three buckets of wheat in the church, now an abandoned edifice, thick with chicken droppings. From the outside, the building looked deserted; the floor had not been scrubbed in years; the sparrows nested in the gables. The plan was, Mimi knew, to keep it thus, for there they kept their kernels, between some double walls.

She had young eyes and ears; she could not help but know. That's where her brothers prayed in strangled tones: "We are in mortal danger. We ask Thee for deliverance. Deliverance! Deliverance!" What if that guilty secret managed to slipped out? Guilt came in waves of heat that swept across her face. *Ach!* How they prayed! How desperately they prayed!

"Lord, we beseech Thee! We beseech Thee! Deliverance! How else can we survive?"

Day after day, she picked her way with cunning. Night after night, struggling for sleep, she blessed and cursed her background. As tales of Stalin's reforms spread, encircling every citizen, the teacher told the class:

"In the collectives, no one starves. And those who foolishly refuse to help rebuild the land collectively will soon be forced into the cattle trucks with rifle butts and clubs."

The teacher had thin lips, sharp eyes and was expert in giving Marxist diatribes. "Now, little Citizen, be careful with your words. Who serves the ruling class? Who's undermining teamwork?"

"I don't know ," Mimi whispered wretchedly, still first in all her classes. By then, she knew things of enormous value to the Party.

To wit: that Sasha, Yuri and Natasha had slaughtered a grown pig. This was a horrid crime. Marleen had salted it away and now was parceling it out at intervals for just the six of them—her family, and no one else! Not even closest neighbors!—instead of sharing it communally for all to partake equally.

"—who still owns flocks of fowl?"

Larissa did. *Ach Gott*! Two ducks still left. Three chickens. And the rooster!

"Just you remember: if you obey, our Comrade Stalin smiles on you," the teacher said, and scribbled something in her notebook to pass on to her betters.

"I will."

"He is the perfect leader. He knows what's best for you. Poets compare him to sun and moon and stars. Don't let your comrades down. You must report all hate crimes. You must tell who hates whom."

"I am reliable. I do what is correct."

The words came of themselves. Outside, the raindrops were gargantuan. The spring earth soaked up moisture. The seedlings pulsing with life.

"I can be relied on absolutely," she said in a low voice, "to carry out every order."

"Do not forget you are a merit child, the youngest one on record," the teacher said, while snapping shut her notebook. "Dare you risk everything? I look at you and think: must I spell out the rules?"

"I know my duty, Citizen." She still was proud she came from Apanlee, but as day followed day, her pride grew in her merit badges. She loved to show them off. She did not want to be a disgrace to her Motherland. She strove to please. She wanted to placate.

But on the other hand, could she turn in her Baba?

For instance, just last night, before the latest storm moved in and started ripping from the clouds such rage that the acacia tree tops started trembling, Natasha saw a shooting star and took it as a timely omen. Natasha's candles were long gone, but still she crossed herself!

"Your harvest will be blessed," Natasha told the twins.

*Ach,* Baba! thought the Pioneer. Your Faith and love and loyalty, as rich as bacon fat!

# Chapter 63

Soon afterwards, the Pioneer brigade leader gave Mimi a white blouse, red scarf and three sugar cubes, along with firm instructions: "Here is a notebook, a pencil, and a ruler. D is for duty. K is for kulak. I expect you to distinguish yourself by reporting to us what you hear."

"Of course I will," said Mimi, cut from the cloth of her obedient clan.

She lived among pariahs. Their Christian dogma was corruption's germs; their monarchist views were well known. She was impatient with their ways. Their thoughts were tiresome and silly, composed of little else but useless sentiment. She knew their furtive sermons and quiet servitude to by-gone days and folkish views were foolish leavings of an outmoded way of life, and dangerous as well—more so as time went on.

The Party, on the other hand, lent Mimi graphic images she could respect and wield. A giant squid, religion! Like slime on naked flesh!

She kept her tongue in check, reluctant to offend. Since she was lithe and limber, she learned to walk on egg shells all the

time. Submissive in her character, she did not like to cause her family unnecessary hurt, but on the other hand, she felt a high regard for Party goals with which to mold herself.

So did a child grow up, torn between family and Party.

She knew that the slogans, sing-songed just right, would earn her a star and a badge, yet on the other hand, however, the words her brothers spoke were sweet and low and kind. They loved her, for she was still small. She loved them because they were handsome and smelled of earth and hay.

She sat between them, small and silent, absorbing what they said. So what if they were praying freaks, imbued with superstition? She loved them still, regardless. She watched them carefully.

When Sasha was angry, the tip of his nose would turn white, but Yuri seldom angered; Yuri quieted; Yuri saddened; his gentle counsel pushed her to the brink of tears. When she came home from school and told them in detail how she would help reform humanity, provided all followed the rules, Yuri always put aside what he was doing and took some time with her.

"We have a higher Lord. There is a higher law."

She argued back: "There's order in the universe. Why else would water run downhill?"

She loved them both, but Yuri more than Sasha. He always scooted over to make a nest for her. If she made herself happy, she displeased him. She felt glum when he was joyful in his Savior, in whom he placed his trust.

She pushed her reddened fingers up inside his sleeves, and there they rested, all curled up, like two small, toasty pets.

"I know what's going on behind the hay stack in the dark," she told him softly, swallowing a lump.

"Don't tell," he cautioned her.

She held her breath. She had the guile and patience of a cat. "I won't. But I don't understand—"

"You're much too young to understand," he said, uncurling each of her small fingers and holding them in his warm hands,

"We have a higher mandate—" He gently stroked her pinkie with his thumb, and when he did that—*ach!* what bliss! She almost offered up her belly to have it scratched as well, but then restrained herself.

"Let that be our secret. Mimi? Can we depend on you?"

She nodded, feeling faint. At such times, in communion with her brothers, the country's functionaries and officials—already stringing wire, camp by camp, to fence the kulaks in—just vanished like dark shadows from her mind.

The teacher raked thin fingers through her graying hair and asked repeatedly: "Who's our model? Who's our hero? Who is the most beloved man who ever walked this earth?"

"Comrade Stalin! Comrade Stalin!" chorused Mimi, along with forty other children, paying homage to a cagey,pckmarked bantam, a man who, though he stood a mere five feet in height, had energetically replaced the sluggish tsars, bewhiskered and corrupt.

Pupils like Mimi were at a premium. She was like a blotter, absorbent.

"We thank thee, Comrade Stalin, for a happy childhood," recited Mimi, striving to be mannerly. She filled three notebooks on that theme. She wrote with even hand:

"Our little father Stalin must be our prime example. He wants a New World Order. He does not wish us caged by outdated beliefs. He is the magnet; we are the filings. He will level the rich and raise up the poor. He strives for a state built on reason. He is getting ready for world Revolution. He is tomorrow's universal ruler of the globe, the master of the masses. The fate of every Soviet citizen rests in his clever hand."

Lest she forget how much she owed to him—the man who chased the past away and spelled it out for her precisely whom to hate and whom to love—she had installed his picture over her bed, to be reminded of her duties daily.

"He and the Soviet citizens are one," she finished with a flourish, although the ink was watery, the blotter soaked with blotches.

"We will never betray one another."

The teacher gave her several sidelong glances: she looked like a stork that was digging for frogs.

"Now, little citizen. Yet one more time. Speak up and answer boldly. Where does the Bible now belong?"

"Atop the compost heap."

Mimi, at ten, was earnest and quite well-informed. She knew who harmed the country, who was above reproach. The God of yesterday had been a tyrant. A forward-looking citizen was free!

She signed her name to everything, for she was eager to do battle for her Party. She sang the Party songs as gustily as possible, believing all people were brothers.

Her body grew muscle from handstands and backflips. She fastened her eye on a proficiency medal. She wrote: "From each according to his skill, to each according to his needs." That was her slogan now, but only one of them.

Aware of her own taint—for she came from exploiters—she wrote long, ornamental essays against her ancestry. She knew that Soviet Russia, in future years, would grow four-season grain.

"Oh, what a man!" she wrote of Joseph Stalin many times, while hunger gnawed her innards. "Each day, he combs the beggars' alleys to rescue gutter children." She wrote five pages on the topic that she, for one, held Papa Stalin's enterprise in very high regard. "He is the kindest friend imaginable—" she wrote, and added after thinking hard: "—much like a kindly uncle."

She took enormous pride in her smooth penmanship and silky sentences. She took great care to loop the smallest letter. She still remembered Uncle Benny in small, odd, idle moments that made her bite her lips. A dwarf-like creature. Guileless. Ancient. Now that she pondered, hardly a man at all. Had he not spoken of the dream that there would come a brand new order? To sweep away all Faith?

On whose side had he been? She wasn't sure at all.

She winced a bit and shushed an inconvenient memory—a memory filled with small specks of bliss out of another time,

when life seemed ancient. Guileless. As fancied and predictable as a familiar fairy tale shared by a sparking fireplace. Nice. Cozy. But believable?

"The page on which all that was written," went the song, "will soon be ripped from history."

Her brothers claimed repeatedly: "You work. You pray. You trust the Lord. You do your duty always, and happiness will come."

"You don't concern yourself with your own happiness," the teacher lectured, daily. "You do your duty, always, and happiness will come."

The words were practically identical. The difference was in action and belief. She knew her duty now—to keep alive the memory of her own forebears' criminality.

She knew the Bible was a fairy tale, not worthy of a thinking mind. She wanted none of that. Regrettably, and to unending shame, she was a German child, sprung from exploiting, vile offenders.

She, too, somehow survived. Her eyes sat in a face so utterly transparent that one could almost see her skull, but she survived because she willed survival with the strength that will come to a desperate child.

She survived with the help of the Party. When she strolled down the street, people walked quickly and had nothing to say to each other.

Still standing on starvation's brink, young Mimi made herself into a worthy Pioneer, who never shirked a meeting. Her sense of civic duty was the key.

Each day, the Pioneers broke into song, all lyrics modified to praise the Soviet leadership Red commissars, poised to destroy the last small shred of bourgeois decadence that had enriched the strong at the expense of the abused and anguished masses.

Hatemongers! Racists! And exploiters! That was the battle cry.

To find hatemongers, racists and exploiters and flush them out of hiding was now the task at hand.

"The Party needs your eyes and ears," cried the Pioneer leader, guidebook in hand. "The morning mists are gone!"

By then, the government officials had decreed that worse than plunder, spoilage, mayhem, monarch worship and corruption—even killing!—was a seditious spirit, a crime against the Soviet Government.

Hatemongering—the crime that made all others pale! Tipping off the government to those hatemongering against the Party's reconstructive efforts was now the foremost task.

At Apanlee the winter seeped through walls and ceilings. The halls were dank and chill. The wind kept slamming doors.

"How else, but on the wings of Faith?" her brothers urged her on.

Those two still banked on Faith, which was foolish. Her brothers had forgotten how to laugh but clung to their belief that they were singled out to resurrect the past. Her eyes were clear. Her mind was fixed on duty.

"You pray. You give yourself to Jesus. You do your duty, always, and happiness will come."

That's what her brothers claimed, but was it true? Did that make sense? It did not sound convincing. Faith was for sluggish minds.

And yet, no matter how she tried to struggle free, it was the one consistent message her brothers wrapped around her heart as she was growing up: their Faith was intertwined with past ordeals and present strife and future safety valves.

She knew her family invested every ounce of energy to spare into this thing called Faith and, hence, into the earth to keep the seedcorn safe. Empowered by their prayers—that was their firm belief!—their wheat would sprout again.

All well and good. But was it true? Or was it air and fluff?

Faith was like poetry. It made the heart feel tender but served no useful purpose. It warmed your soul, perhaps, but did not fill your belly.

"Remember our Christmas songs? Remember how at Easter—"

Whatever for? She memorized the two important Soviet goals, twin tickets to the future: Kill off the old. Salute the new. She knew the formula by heart. She was up on the sorry tricks of kulaks and hatemongers. She merely shrugged and deftly changed the topic.

"Good riddance! Finally!" said Mimi to her classmates, who had their slogans pat.

Uppermost in all their minds was the collective spirit; its vehicles were deference and zeal. The future was the goal. Her classmates were already way ahead of her; they could barely remember the past. She did her best to follow their example.

If she was honest with herself in odd and quirky moments, she found herself admitting that the color and the scent of Christian holidays had not quite faded from her heart, but she could do without remembering, for it took an enormous effort to forget.

She desperately wanted to forget. She knew she could. She tried.

Yet floating up came memories, unbidden, all the time—so brutal and so bloody that they still gouged her soul.

"The Christian holidays? Just relics of the past," she said, and watched her mother, who remembered still the patter of small feet, just slump and bump into a wall.

There was no choice for someone such as Mimi. Unless she re-designed herself according to the Soviet plan and edict, she would forever be detested and despised. She bore the same last name engraved on all those crumbling headstones, but she was different; she was young. She was ambitious. Smart.

Best yet, she was no racist.

She knew that she belonged to tomorrow, while they belonged to yesterday. She barely knew her ancestors by name and had no wish to be contaminated by faulty, bourgeois ways.

She knew, by then, as did Marleen, as did the twins and even old Natasha: the shortest way to global unity was over a dead

body.

All her friends were Pioneers. She knew nobody of her age who had not turned himself into a worthy Pioneer.

At home raged struggle, want, fear, and despair. Her father was dead; her mother numb. Larissa was still a bit daffy. The twins were still busy surviving. Rare were the moments, verily, when someone would remember her and tiptoe to her bed to give her one last hug.

She made an expert survey to map her strategies. She was agile in mind and in body; a gymnast's career was her goal. She was not ready to be laughed at by her classmates without reason. She was ashamed of her land-gobbling, racist forebears, who had been praised and honored by the tsars.

Where the Party-loyal Pioneers gathered, no one was in rags, nobody suffered hunger. Life was still threadbare, filled with hunger pangs, but at the very least, no longer did she have to fill her stomach with earth or with water to trick it.

No longer did she have to swallow grass as she had done that grim, wet day when those two Kansas foreigners arrived with burlap sacks and quackery and proved to her forevermore Faith was a mockery and sham.

The end result was this: she did her best to hide her thoughts, but even so, her brothers had a way of looking wounded and distressed that made her knee caps soft when she told them, repeatedly, as soon as she had her own arguments down pat, that they were clinging to a brand of superstition that was unworthy of two forward-looking citizens.

"Salvation comes through Christ," they told her, looking sad. "Born in a virgin night."

She shrugged to show contempt. A strange Messiah who claimed that he could walk on water, sprung from a married woman who had cheated on her husband and blamed the consequences on the Holy Ghost? It was grotesque and lewd—not worthy of another look, much less an argument. The factor that

would usher in the New World Order, she believed, was rationality. All forward-looking citizens now had to do was put their shoulders to the collective wheel and shove. There was no conflict in her heart about the dusty deities of yesterday. Thanks to her preacher cousin Dewey, that toady from America, she knew forevermore that, in the name of Jesus Christ, no morsel came for free.

Mimi still remembered Dewey and his lisping son, who checked their sallow brand of Faith into the drafty halls of Apanlee with loathing and contempt. That day had left a painful wound—an injury never forgotten.

She understood from personal ordeal how strangers from the outside world meant harm to Mother Russia. She had no doubt about the toxic motives of such racists, opportunists, swindlers, and connivers who used the Bible as a tool to force humiliation on a child so weakened by starvation she couldn't wipe the tears out of her vintage eyes.

For years, she felt nothing but hatred for Faith. Good riddance to that loathsome hoax—the sooner gone, the better! Once and for all, those two Americans had helped her cleanse herself of harmful old wives' tales. She knew that she, for one, put solid stock in evidence. The key was rationality. It would deflate all yesterday's mistakes, prick them like a balloon.

She only need recall those tufts of hair she saw in Dewey's flaring nostrils as he stood, feet splayed, and gave his bleated offerings to God, to double up with laughter.

The New World Order was her Faith. She would not fail her country. And so she shouted back, as loudly as she could: "Religion is their poison! Their Gospel is sheer filth!"

The teacher hovered. "Preachers? Priests?"

"By definition, fools!"

"Close," said the teacher. "Try again."

"Provocateurs and saboteurs—"

"We'll have to free the country of this menace," said the teacher.

But there was Yuri. There was Sasha. And how they tried, those two, like spindly, gentle beasts, to nudge her with their noses and try to win her over to their world!

"You are His little lamb. He cares for you," they told her, and she quaked. "Here. Fold your little hands." From her scalp to her footsoles ran tremors.

Her brothers had flames on their tongues, a mystic hand upon their shoulder blades—a hand that no one else could see. Mimi knew they saw themselves as chosen by their past to be honed to perfection—and that included Faith, and that included ancestry.

"Just where do I belong," she asked herself repeatedly.

To that dilemma, sadly, there was no happy ending, since she was not a Russian and never could be one. She was a German child.

Her brothers were her private world—a small, forbidden luxury. They were the only adult males she knew. She worshipped them; when they came home from having worked the soil from dawn to dusk to coax it to regenerate, they smelled just like a warm and sun-baked pumpkin in July. She was tired of winter and want. She sat down on a footstool to listen.

She watched them all the time. She longed to curl up in their arms where it was soft and warm. She liked those Gospel stories best that had to do with harvests.

"You make your bed, you lie in it," such was Natasha's wisdom.

She, too. Wherever Natasha bustled about, there was still that odd whiff of her icons.

For Mimi, so it was for years as she grew up—years emptied of all pride in her own German ancestry.

She marched in parades; she carried the flag of the future that snapped like a whip in the wind, aware that she did not belong in the groove of her family's desperate prayers. There were times, however, when she slipped in quietly because she was sleepy and small and longed to be cuddled a bit.

She would pretend that she was dull and sleepy; she needed tucking in. She kept her eyes downcast, her heart in firm control, as they besieged her from both sides with their sweetly-told stories of Jesus.

"See? We are certain of our Savior's love for you, " they told her many times, and heaven knows what else. They fancied themselves in alliance. They seemed to know Him well; to her, all that was mystery; she never even caught a glimpse, but He was there: they sensed His godly presence.

She, steeped in evidence and reason, did not like Him at all—this so-called Savior and his repeated peek-a-boos in response to their scandalous prayers. They called that partnership? It promised more than it bestowed. All that was bothersome and sick—like a sty in the eye or a cold in the nose! She longed to see clearly, breathe deeply.

The teacher noted on a form that her star pupil, Mimi, was growing in awareness. She told the youngster constantly: "You must set your sights high, and then higher."

So Mimi did. She had her eye on speedy advancement, her ear on the slogans that worked. The other children watched her with curiosity and, sometimes, jealousy. When her conscience started pinching, quickly she soothed it by checking her noteworthy ideological chart. She made sure she was noted for her loud, emphatic songs. She applauded in all the right places. She cheered at every rally. Mastering nausea took swiftness and practice and skill. A squeamish stomach was a liability. She filled a notebook on that thought; her essay received the five highest possible marks.

She hid that honor from the twins, whom she was yearning to impress.

Both Yuri and Sasha insisted that the Party's methods of farming were faulty. The twins would shoe a horse before taking it out on the road. They would lovingly rub it down after making it pull a large load.

"If they keep doing what they're doing," said Yuri, for exam-

ple, "they'll ruin the land, they'll ruin themselves. They'll have to face the music—"

At the newly formed *kolkhoz*, people quarreled and bickered and clashed. They beat a mule until it fell dead in the furrows. They cursed the workers until they spit back: "Why work ourselves to death?"

"For if the state takes our gains, what is the use of it?" the sullen workers cried. Already there was talk of nasty, raucous confrontations between an angry Soviet foreman and a crew he chased down from the ovens with his stick.

"You will be fined! Or whipped!" the angry foreman yelled.

"So be it," cried the peasants, shouting in one voice. They had seditious counter-arguments. "What good are our collective acres if we can't plant the crop? What good is our land if we can't own a horse?"

The government inspectors warned: "Here is a list of do's and don'ts."

The peasants merely sneered. They gave it brief flicks of the tongue.

The quota agents yelled: "Here, Citizens! Here are your quota charts."

The peasants took them to the outhouse. They spat against the wind.

The peasants dug in deep. Dissent was seething everywhere. It was soon clear to all that something had to be planted, and soon, but what? How? When? How much?

"Why would we want to climb aboard a ship that's bound to sink tomorrow?" the workers asked each other. When they heard sudden footsteps, all conversation stopped.

This, now, was Mimi's world. She stood between two boulders that moved on one another, a fragile ladybug.

The twins belonged to "them"—hatemongers! Foreigners! exploiters!—as she did not and never would. Yet "they" were part of her—the only family she knew.

And what a stubborn creed!

You could bend them, you could snarl and tangle them, you could burden, curse and frustrate them, you could even try to snap their spirits—a German stood his ground. In the dead of the night, the recalcitrants took to the streets, paint pot in hand, and covered every slogan the dutiful, enlightened Pioneers had painted on the fences.

Before another year was gone, Mimi knew the twins were being shadowed. Not that it softened them. She hung her head in silence. It was painful to sort herself out. Her brothers had that mysterious wellspring that gave them certitude and strength. They were older and wiser than she.

She knew that she was growing in awareness. Already she was tall and lanky, and boys gave her long stares.

"Call me Tamara, " said the teacher, a grim-looking female, whose long face was pitted with acne. "We don't need class distinctions. We are all equal now. The New World Order has arrived. Repeat after me: the future will bathe us in light."

The youngsters all chorused: "The future will bathe us in light."

The teacher hovered close, her glance on Mimi's nape: "It's all for one, and one for all. Why do we run our prison vans—?"

"To weed out harmful elements." For instance, take last week—a string of circumspect arrests for sabotage.

She thought of the twins, sick with horror. They never left her mind. Her fear was as sharp and as sudden as a knife, but it would never do to show anxiety before the teacher and the class.

The teacher hovered close. "What do we do with traitors?"

"We send them to Siberia."

"Don't let us down!" the teacher hectored daily. "We count on you. You are the link. The country needs your vigilance."

A few forgotten leaves whirled in the gusts of a departing year. The tree-lined roads grew dark.

"Where there's a prison, there is also redress. What is that, redress?"

"A petition to visit, perhaps?"

"Don't lean on your elbows. Straighten your Pioneer tie. What similarity is there between a parasite and preacher?"

"Why, both exist without producing," reported Mimi, eyes downcast, thus stabbing her beloved brothers in the heart.

She could not bring herself to go that far, to turn her preacher brothers in to the authorities to be corrected and reformed, but she came close. She hedged and stalled. She lied, deceived, and cheated.

She needed stars to go to camp; she needed extra points to qualify for honors. To be a racist child of German ancestry, to have that branded on her soul—while struggling with a whole array of slick avoidance tactics to keep a measure of control—was not an easy matter.

# Chapter 64

A Donoghues had found a mildewed document stashed in a rusty tackle box and claimed, by quoting an attorney—who promised him with many silky words he would not charge him any fees unless he won the case—that the old homestead Lizzy had acquired from the cheat with the elastic conscience, the cad who'd left her sitting high and dry amidst the weeds of prairie land, belonged to the Donoghues instead.

"It was a lease and not a sale," they claimed repeatedly, still eyeing Mennotown's prime property, expertly riding roughshod over both the spirit and the letter of the law.

"Fie! Fie!" cried Doctorjay, torn between Abigail and Lizzy. Not even Doctorjay could close his eyes to worsening reality. The have-nots were eyeing the haves.

He tried to be a go-between. His tongue grew raw from trying. Things went from bad to worse. His in-laws were mixed up in secret goings-on. Life was to come to them, that was their aspiration, served on a silver platter.

The next week, Abigail went shopping, attired in blue smock, white socks with colored borders, and flaming red bandanna. She,

too, was drunk with victory.

"Every star in the sky within reach!"

Her words would make the rounds for weeks. The leftists kept shaping her values. She had that broad clan of her own; most of them, now as before, looked still as unkempt as the streets of Wichita. They were slapping and kicking each other, rough-housing. Their geese and their chickens ran wild. Their doors came unhinged. Their window panes stayed cracked. They squabbled with their neighbors. Bareheaded and barefooted, all! Ignoring the foot scrapers, even!

The Donoghues kept everybody's feelings in a turmoil. Soon, Doctorjay was trembling with confusion.

They had their counter-arguments.

"It's not a hand-out. It's our due. Equality. Fraternity. And Liberty. We'll take whatever's not willingly shared."

There always had been gaps between rich and poor, but now there was venom mixed in. Some people went even so far as to see Doctorjay as prime example of values being watered down—those self-same values he had brought along when he came swaying all the way to Kansas atop his prairie schooner to marry Noralee.

He argued himself hoarse: "When we came here to farm the land, the one thing all of us had was our honesty. *Ach*, were we poor! Not yet a single team of horses in all of Sedgwick County! But nobody expected a handout!"

Ah, for the olden times! With opportunities galore! When you could make your own way, step by step and day by day, by pulling people's teeth and lancing boils—and stash away the savings!

The Donoghues grew increasingly audacious and ever more tenacious. They never gave up hope of settling an old score. It was clear they were up to no good. They telephoned excessively. They reeked of unwashed life. In three words: they were trouble—writ large.

The neighborhood watched in alarm.

The saddest part for Doctorjay was the estrangement his marriage to his garish Abigail had wedged between himself and Jan, whom he loved more, respected more, and wanted more to please than all of Mennotown combined.

"Jan! Here's to you! To the caboose! Here! Have a swig! Don't be a killjoy. Bottoms up!"

Jan answered brusquely and with irritation while puttering about. "That stuff is not for me."

"How can it hurt? Just once?"

"You cured me with that wisdom tooth. Remember? Now leave me be. I said, just leave me be!"

It was a rare moment of tension; it had passed in a flash. But both men sensed it keenly.

The healer tried to catch Jan's eye to find the old-time friendship there. That was no longer possible. Autumnal days had come; the gardens began to look bare.

"I'll get him yet," swore Doctorjay, while trying to devise a game. He felt he sat, bare-backsides, on a tight clump of nettles. He itched all over, dared not scratch.

He spread his strategy in front of Abigail. He wanted both Jan's friendship and Abigail's lush love.

"Jan's getting stuffy. He's no fun. He's lost his sense of humor. He needs to loosen up. Pass the potato pancakes."

It was all right again in Mennotown to fry potato pancakes. The German language schools had never quite recovered since the war had come to an end more than a decade ago, but most of the Muellers and Meyers were back.

"Don't waste your time," said Abigail sarcastically. "He'll never have that drink and toast to friendship, love, equality and brotherhood."

"What do you mean?"

"Jan's reputation as a teetotaler is known all over Sedgwick County."

All kinds of bets were riding on the outcome.

One positive by-product of advancing age was, luckily, that

Josie didn't bicker Lizzy into corners any more and hardly ever raised her voice to parlay socialism. Weeks, even months, would pass in silence, without a single argument. She only dabbled in black magic when she and Rarey talked.

She talked to him in code. She lost herself in him.

And Rarey, a responsive child, was still her little wonder. He did not disappoint his mother. He was her wonder child.

A pencil stub and a small scrap of paper were all that Rarey needed to keep himself content. His brush strokes were as smooth and even as a slim boat's prow cutting quietly through tormented waters. His mind was as alive with images as the Arkansas River was alive with trout after a hefty rain. From the day he was born, he showed talent—talent in buckets, and genius to match.

Rarey's every picture throbbed with magnificence and meaning. His mother shone with pride and ownership, her eyes like molten glass, sipping her lemon tea.

While Josie grew ever more still, Lizzy grew ever more shrill. Advancing age had taken Lizzy's benign nature and sucked it into a black hole. She never noticed. She had progressed from youth and middle age to old age the way she walked the neighborhood—just step by step, and stair by stair, her eyes and energies and concentration fastened firmly on her goal, which was to live correctly.

Now life was almost finished. She knew her end was near.

She made the most of it. She had already suffered through a serious kidney problem. A Wichita doctor had predicted her heart would be next, but Doctorjay had sneered away the city slicker, and handed her his own supply of stomach bitters.

"Five drops three times a day will forestall early death," he said to her, and that came true; she still was here, on earth, right next to her geraniums, both just as spry as ever.

Lizzy stuck by Doctorjay's advice. "Oh, thank you. Thank you kindly. And my bill?"

"Don't even mention it."

"No. I insist."

"If you insist."

"I do. You heard me. I insist."

"Let's say three and a quarter—"

"Well. Hm. A bit steep, don't you think? Last time you charged two-seventy-five—"

That was the ritual. She trusted Doctorjay with her last dime, but she still watched her pennies. He knew what he was doing; she knew what she was doing. She knew he would not make the same mistake that he had made with Noralee: ignore her serious symptoms of palpitations of the heart, while mocking them as evidence of jealousy.

"Five drops," she told her visitors with pride, one foot already in the grave, "will forestall early death."

"And still so many teeth," they marveled.

Old Lizzy surveyed her realm in triumph. She came of hardy stock. She took it all in stride, even her kidney problems. She was just like her hardy neighbors, appreciative of health.

She kept fanning herself with excitement. She was still plagued by a stubborn cough, but she still wasn't finished. Her work on earth was almost done, except for Josie's last-born.

There was still Rarey, to be sheltered from a mother's untoward ambitions and worldly vanity that had already cost one child. For what a jewel, Rarey!

"Before it is too late, I must make sure," she said to Little Melly.

Lizzy knew she must imbue this precious child of Jan's with her own bedrock values—and not a day too soon. "Run, Rarey, run! Fetch Dewey Epp and tell him I have hunted through my prayer book and found the quote he needs—"

That's how you drew a line—by finding tasks to do that tied into the Bible, to keep a child from straying off too far.

Time passed.

The acorns started falling.

Jan never gave up hope he would win Josie's love—at least win back affection. He was not blind, nor was he deaf, nor was he totally unschooled in matters of romance. His hair, by then,

had turned to snow, and Josie, still the same! Still haughty and aloof. He could no longer hope she would grow out of it.

"I love her," said Jan Neufeld. He loved her, whims and all.

His love for her was hard in grain, a wonder to behold. Her feelings for the man who gave her everything—a splendid home three stories high, the widest fireplace in all of Kansas, as many greenbacks as her fists could throw into the social whirl her trendy friends in Wichita stirred up—were intricate in hue.

An ocean lay between them.

She had some hidden scarring, deep inside, she never touched upon. It was as if she had thrown the key to her heart in the river.

Not all was lost, however. Between them they had Rarey—a new life sprung from a violent night. It was as though that night had wedged an opaque pane of glass between them. She still saw the man who had looted and plundered. He knew there was ice in her heart.

He also knew she hurt. He was not made of stone. He knew there was the mocking side of Mennotown that Josie, being Josie, would never manage to live down, though Lizzy helped defy the biting tongues in every way she could.

Josie, over time, was wilting undeniably from sheer exhaustion of the spirit. Without her husband, she was nothing. She seemed to have accepted that. She glued an odd, obliging smile to her still-pretty face, suppressed a sigh or two, snapped shut her book, served zwieback topped with homemade jam, and did as she was told—at least, most of the time.

Hence, Lizzy was in her full glory.

From her corner window in the kitchen, where Jan had bolted down her chair so it didn't slip when she staggered and had to hold on—since worsening glaucoma now seemed to be an added problem—Lizzy savored sovereignty. She was the undisputed matriarch of a clan whose pride and joy was Rarey.

When the caboose read things to Lizzy, when he explained the world of art to her, the hours just slid by!

She watched him sketching things from his imagination. He

had a perfect eye and small, precise, slim hands. His mind was sharp yet flexible, expansive, much like a rubber band, his fingers as nimble as ten little, fluttering birds.

"Come. Lean against my knees," Lizzy begged, so she could put a trembling hand upon his head and savor generations.

She wished she could live on and on to see him to adulthood but knew she asked too much. Why, any moment now, she knew with virtual certainty, the Lord would come and smother her in His embrace—in fact, send several angels to come swooping down and lift her to those meadows evergreen of which the heavens were composed.

Lizzy was too bashful to admit this selfish thought, but she kept wondering if there were tubs of butter where she was going next. Although the Bible didn't talk of butter tubs, it definitely talked of meadows.

She knew she would find out, and soon.

She liked to speak of her impending death, as though she were fixing to go to a wedding. "Now I shall lay myself out," she'd told her grandkids more than once, and all of them had gathered. She made the most of her recoveries. Her kitchen was, as always, a haven of comfort for all. That's where the village females congregated, once a week, to do their backlogged darning.

She launched herself more thoroughly. She reveled in her role and status, entitled as she was to all the deference and honors she deserved. By then, she was too rheumatoid to navigate the smallest step across her icy porch without the help of Josephine, who always lent a hand.

"Run, Rarey! Run! Get me my peppermint drops. You, too, Josie! Hurry! Get me my footstool and bring me two pillows—"

Josie rose obediently. She pulled a wooden face but did as she was told.

Old Lizzy looked around, exulting, to see if her lady friends noticed. They had, and they nodded, impressed to the hilt: Old

Lizzy merely snapped her fingers, and all her wishes now came true. She started glowing head to toe as though a flame had kindled deep within her.

"Fetch me my glasses also, will you?"

The neighbors watched Josie rifle through every last drawer. This was as good as life could get, like eating sunflower seeds: once you shelled one, you simply had to shell another.

"And let the cat out, too."

"All right! All right!" Josie practically sprang from her seat, and Lizzy leaned back and rocked herself, thus savoring her triumph.

"You didn't close the door," she pointed out, unable to let up. "I seem to feel a draft—"

It had taken a lifetime of struggle and the proverbial patience of Job, but Lizzy had won in the end. Her left leg could not quite support her body any more, but if the weather was decent, she still took her walks to the neighborhood store, where people mentioned her longevity and asked: "What is the secret, Lizzy?"

"Fresh air, firm prayers," smiled Lizzy.

Death would destroy her old and useless body, but she had plans to waft her soul into eternity on the wings of Dewey's prayers. That was her plan. What medication couldn't do, a prayer could accomplish.

Her cuckoo clocks kept cuckooing. She was as ready for the final curtain call as she would ever be. Meanwhile, let all the neighbors marvel.

In preparation for her death, Lizzy often went to visit Herbert's grave, where all was sweetness and decay. When she returned, she shared her happiness with Josie.

"Oh, I cried. I cried. It was lovely."

Even into ancient age, Lizzy's spirit shone as brightly as the Kansas sun shone in July. "Death could come tomorrow," she told Josie, who had little to say in reply.

"Next week. Or next month."

"Well—"

"Next year?"

Lizzy kept rocking herself in contentment. She had nothing to fear; she awaited the blast of the trumpets. Nobody knew when Rapture would come, but that it would happen—and soon!—was already a foregone conclusion.

"And when that happens, dearest—why, I'll just close my eyes, draw my last breath, and melt into the arms of my Savior—"

"You would. You would," said Josephine, with emphasis on you.

This after all these years!

Some quirks of Josephine's just wouldn't go away, no matter the veneer. Old Lizzy pondered that reply and other oddities, searching for a fitting comeback but always ready to excuse the frailties of people whom she loved.

"Have yet another glass of milk," she said. She took firm hold of Josie's shoulder to give her counsel emphasis. "There's nothing milk and prayers can't heal."

But drinking milk, fresh from the udder, still brought on vertigo in Josie.

"My Rarey will be first in everything," said Josephine to Little Melly, next, filling up her cup.

The spinster blinked with puzzlement. "A Pomeranian prince?"

"You can say that again."

This was another nice development of getting older, growing mellow. No longer did the two hold hidden grudges in their respective bosoms like two old boards with rusty nails. Now all was unity to every naked eye, which was the right deportment and to Jan's benefit.

"He never throws a tantrum? He never breaks a pencil?"

"Not on your life. No. Never."

"Amazing. Just amazing."

"Yes. Isn't it? He's just like a sapling, extending his branches to take in the blue of the sky."

"You don't want a lopsided youngster." Little Melly said that to survive and with Archibald in mind.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It wouldn't hurt to give him a newspaper route before school."

"Whatever for? We don't need the cash. We can afford most anything. His daddy is one of the richest men in Kansas."

"He needs to be out in rough winds. That way he'll grow up rugged."

"Hitting home run does not make a man," said Josie, full of charity, since she had private guesses about Archie.

"And what is that supposed to mean?" Little Melly kept stitching away.

"Why, not a thing. Why, Little Melly! Nothing!"

Jan raised his voice sometimes to chide his son a bit, to add a dash of influence, but never once his hand. He even took the little fellow to watch sunsets. The result was a near-perfect child.

Day by day and step by step, both Jan and Josie walked their last born a little deeper into culture and urbanity. They did not fear that they would overheat his brain, while piling books on top of books, ideas on top of ideas. They thought he was a potted palm; they had only to water it.

Little Melly, by contrast, had Archie.

She still mothered her nephew, doing this and that. He was grown now, an eligible bachelor. He looked upon her, he respected her, as though she were his mother and he her favorite son; he did as she had taught him; he kept his prayer book atop a dainty doily, his sheets without a single crease.

Archie was gawky, not to say ugly, but was very fond of her, and she of him; it was a mutual thing. When she and Archie were alone, she still kissed him goodnight, with soft lips, moist with spittle. He liked her to button him up to his neck. She hated it when he was gone.

Best of all, Archie confounded all the neighborhood with an astonishing and pleasing piety that centuries had wrought. Be-

fore he even came of age, he packed the church with worshippers.

No one was as sure of the Gospel as Archie. Today, you can still see him prancing on the television screen, but even then, he liked to play to audiences. Give him a pulpit and a prayer book, and Archie danced and pranced; he whispered and he shouted; the windows shook; the congregation sobbed.

If Archie couldn't find a girl who pleased him well enough to stop him from pulling his hangnails, then maybe, reasoned Little Melly, her dearest Archibald could Christianize the world?

Little Melly was certain the future would even a score. Archie was no romantic catch, but quite an ardent Christian. He had only one eye, and that eye had a film; girls shied away from him; and sometimes even Little Melly would wake right in the middle of a dream and toss and turn with anxious thoughts that lacked a proper focus. On the practical aspects of love, she was hazy.

She took her worries about Archie, one by one, to Doctorjay, after she had gathered evidence enough to make a case for them.

"He swings his legs. He licks his fingers. He crooks his little pinkie as though he were a girl—"

The healer agreed: those were the symptoms of a warning. "I must admit I saw it coming."

With resolution, she pushed on. "He blows into his soup with puckered lips so that the droplets fly. Is that still normalcy?"

The healer checked on every clue that she laid bare for him. He even lectured Archie:

"Don't swing your legs. Don't lick your fingers. Don't crook your little pinkie as though you were a girl. Don't blow into your soup with puckered lips—"

"Mind your own business," Archie said, this in a nasty undertone.

# Chapter 65

A month before the acorns started falling, Jan first had serious trouble at the mill. Labor unrest had been there before—friction during lunch breaks, grumbling as the pay was handed out. From there, things went from bad to worse.

Jan bought a dog from the police in Wichita to help his night guard make the rounds, and yet the Donoghues became more boisterous; their heckling never stopped. He heard them shouting slogans for Equality, Fraternity and Liberty through several loudspeakers that they had mounted on a truck. More than once, it even came to blows between the Donoghues and neighbor youths, whose ire they'd aroused.

Each time the constable arrived to separate the rowdies, Jan hoped they would pack up and leave, but they seemed in no hurry. The Donoghues were there to stay. The deacons hinted daily that worse was yet to come, and they were right; the greengrocer told unbelievable stories.

All this caused great discord in Mennotown where people slept as they had always slept, with every door unlocked.

Jan blamed himself for these developments. He needed to be

firm, lay down the law, enforce the rules, and that, for him, was difficult. Of late, his mind was simply not on business. Faint sparks of light danced in his brain, and more than once, to his surprise, he carelessly miscalculated numberwork and found he had to borrow money from the bank.

He paled when he learned how dear such money came. The interest on his needed loan was high; it killed his appetite; he started having splitting headaches.

He lost his mood for other people's woes. "Not now," he said to Dewey, when Dewey came a-canvassing.

"What do you mean, not now? You are a ten percenter."

"I overspent a bit. I need an extra grain insurance policy, and grain insurance policies are dear."

"You don't need grain insurance. God watches over you."

Insurance was the Devil's latest scheme. You only bought yourself disaster policies when you stopped trusting in the Lord.

"Your profits are slipping? And who would be surprised?"

"I'll make it up to you next year."

"Grain-rich, cash-poor, huh? Right?" mocked Dewey. If Dewey saw a business wobbling, he saw the hand of God. He launched himself politically: "This country's going to the dogs. This is no game of dominoes."

Dewey chaired the Hoover-for-President Club. Here was a candidate to almost everybody's liking: a deeply pious fellow with broad shoulders, a round chin, hair neatly parted in the middle, a stickler for detail. Rich meals were part of his daily routine.

"With a new congress voted in," predicted Dewey confidently, "hems will drop. Markets will go up. You don't need grain insurance."

"I signed some legal papers—"

"You mean to say you're willing to pay interest to the usurers?"

To Dewey Epp, the usurers were maddening—all in pursuit of Mammon. Here's what they did: They took the cash out of Jan's pockets and put it in their own. They wore carnations in

their buttonholes to advertise good will, but sidled up to every rabble and canaille.

"Where is your conscience, Jan? The riffraff is gathering strength. This labor union business will be your ruin, and when the unions move in, you watch it, buddy! Watch it!"

"As if I didn't know."

"Some people could get hurt."

"I know."

"Those blasted Donoghues grow ever more rambunctious."

"You're telling me?"

"You must lay down the law. Now, are you still a ten percenter, or must I strike your name?"

Two of the Donoghues came visiting. They had hard, fevered eyes, and each one wore a triangular beard.

"Why should a foreman get more money than we do? We want equality. This is America." They stared at Jan; they looked unkempt and insolent. Jan's patience was down to a trickle. It was a muggy afternoon. He felt a strong revulsion, an almost visceral nausea that rose in a gray wave of bile. He struggled to focus his gaze: something hummed in his ears like a bee.

"Your foreman earned his place. You haven't."

"We work the same long hours."

Jan didn't add: "He's family. He is my daughter's husband's brother." The unions harped on that.

"Paid holidays," said one.

"Paid sick leave," said the other.

Jan spoke to the opposite wall. "Pay you for loafing? Absurd."

"We are entitled. It's either that, or else, the unions."

"That's out of bounds. That's unacceptable." The glare through the window kept blurring Jan's vision. He longed for his cool bedroom. He struggled to keep his voice even.

"Isn't your mother ashamed of you two? Don't you know the harm you do to her? Your mother has a reputation to uphold, now that she married Doctorjay. Did your mother raise you sav-

ages?"

The Donoghues took turns. "It's criminal, the way some people keep on hoarding riches, whereas their workers grovel in the dirt."

"We want our share."

"No more. No less."

You're exploiting us."

"That's un-American."

Between long silences, Jan studied the two. His heart was leaden with foreboding. He looked at his own hands, gnarled long ago by heavy labor.

"I worked like a donkey," he said at long last. "Call me anything you like, but don't—don't call me un-American."

The roughnecks stood their ground.

"We want our share."

"No compromise."

"We need a union here."

Fixed pay, Jan knew, was next. Why pay a worker costly summer wages October through December when all work slowed and coffee breaks were extra-long? It made no sense at all.

"I'm not without a heart. I do my best, and I am fair. Ask anyone. Today, I pay you three times as much compared to what my mother ever paid you folks, before we had machinery that helped us husk the corn and stack the sheaves."

"We want what's fair."

"What you call fair would ruin me." Something inside Jan's head was throbbing. Although it was late afternoon and almost time for supper, the Kansas sun outside baked every cobblestone.

"I'll look into this union business," said Jan, against his better judgment, for he felt strangely vulnerable, sitting there behind his desk this brightly-lit, aggressive afternoon.

"Time's running out."

"There's been a slump in grain sales. A serious slump. As soon as our exports bounce back—"

The prices of almost all products had fallen; oats sold a dime a bushel; corn brought two paltry pennies more. Not even Lizzy

knew about the chattel mortgage on that special piece of land Jan had bought for cash on Rarey's birth, after a truly exceptional harvest. It was indebted now.

"We're giving you fair warning."

"I'll see what I can do."

Jan knew he could have taken out another loan to ease his workers' grievances, but his commitments to the church, his family and his town lay on him like a sack of stones. And Josie was dreaming of art school for Rarey.

One of his tormentors now settled back with a sarcastic squint. "We want an answer. Now."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Some people, you might say, are in the mood for fun."

Wrath rose in Jan—much like a cresting wave—for this was cheeky talk. "Look, if there's work that must be done because the seasons push, I say it must be done! I can't have artificial schedules. The Chamber would be furious! This country wasn't built on sloth—"

"The winds of change—"

Jan cut them off; his patience had run out. "Look here, you two! Don't push me past my limit because your mother married my best friend. I pay my workers what they've earned. I don't cheat them; nor do I work them harder than the task or the seasons demand—"

"—the winds of change will blow your flivver off the road. Right off the road, Jan Neufeld."

Jan's neck grew thick with the implied insult. "Get out," he said, "before I throw you out."

"A match," they told each other, smirking, still lurking between door and jamb, "can make our argument much better than we can."

When word spread far and wide about the possibility of arson, Jan's mother begged: "Fire them. Just let them go! There is no way to please the Donoghues. No way! The night guard has already spotted a suspicious stranger twice—"

"They need their jobs," said Josephine. "What's more, they need a raise. Estella's once again expecting."

"She no longer says 'pregnant,' however," said Lizzy to herself.

Out loud she said: "Again?" She put both elbows on the table, for being old gave her advantages and privileges she savored to the hilt. She coughed, and Rarey ran for her peppermint drops. She fainted, and Josephine ran for the camphor.

"Again." Josie consulted a small pocket mirror. "I suspect that it isn't her fault."

Soon after, Jan arranged to sit down with an insurance man to see where he needed protection, but Lizzy shooed the agent from his door. It was her duty to warn Jan and forestall worse to come. That's why she had come, to forestall.

She smiled brightly with the wisdom drawn from decades and told her son, himself near retirement age:

"Look, it all starts and ends with charity. It's simple: whatever you give to the needy will be returned to you ten-fold. That is all the protection you need."

"Did Dewey visit you?"

"Of course he did. He told me everything."

"I might have known!"

"Have Josie sort a pile of discards for Estella, and hide some cash within. That way, no one can say that you've grown stingy. I'd like to die with my honor intact—" This included an unbroken string of donations. "You're short on money, son? Is that why you won't tithe, as you have always done? You need some money? Why not ask? Why beat about the bush? Tell me what's wrong. I'm your mother. You know that I can take most anything, except a son who isn't ten percenting."

She knew she had some money somewhere. She didn't quite remember where, but she would look for it.

"Demand for Lizzy's Cheese is at an all-time peak—"

She spelled things out for him. "The Finkelsteins again?" she asked, to spice the day a bit.

Jan didn't argue that. He didn't even try to take the stinger

from her words, though she expected that.

She saw that Josie, by the window, raised her chin. She set her own jaw firmly:

"This union stuff. It's dangerous. It's everywhere. Your workers are in danger of contamination. What will be next? Roast pig for breakfast? *Ach!* The Donoghues would like that—wouldn't they? What will be next? Stretch out and fall asleep at noon?"

This irked Old Lizzy most: that every Donoghue expected life served on a silver platter. Where was it all going to end?

"I have the gift of second sight," she told her son, who nodded. Jan saw with increased clarity that Dewey was right; the Lord and His work must come first. "I have the formula. All will be well, as long as people pay attention to the Gospel and do what's right by God. Dismiss the Donoghues. The Donoghues are trouble. And I mean trouble! Trouble! It's just like Dewey said: They've caught the union bug."

"I know."

"This country is losing its fiber. Does grain grow by itself? Do chickens feed themselves? As Dewey pointed out in church in front of everybody just last week, you used to be a solid ten percenter—"

"You plan to give the Donoghues their marching papers, Jan?" asked Josie, from the window, now stabbing with her darning needle. Hard.

"It seems I have no choice."

"Estella's expecting again."

"Another mouth to feed," sighed Lizzy.

"She needs a wage-earning husband," said Josie.

"You know who is behind all this? I'm telling you. It is the shyster lawyers. If they take their old claim to court, the shysters will get rich. Jan's in for serious trouble—"

"Where are the papers, Lizzy?"

"We had a clear agreement. We even shook hands on the deal—"

"Mom, try to think. Was it an outright sale?"

"Why, it's been ages. Ages!" What papers? She really didn't know. What difference did it make? She started sniffling with distress. "Was there a document? There could have been. I might have stuck it in my apron. I might have washed that apron. Why, in the olden days, we didn't need the lawyers. A handshake was enough, and furthermore—"

That was the trouble with the younger generation—they didn't understand. They didn't understand that, in staying on the right side of the law, there was no need for lawyering. One's conscience did all the policing.

"I handed that swindler my last two dollars, for that miserable pigeon-fouled shack! The conniver! The rascal! The drifter! He took to his heels and was gone! I never saw him again! Whereas the three of us—Herb, Jan and me, with just a mule between us, the soil below, the good Lord at our side and His fine sky above—"

Awash in reminiscence, Old Lizzy rocked herself. With Jan's help and with her dear departed second husband's help, she, Lizzy Neufeld, a female immigrant from Russia, had launched the finest wheat domain in the entire state of Kansas. Did she deserve a son who lapsed in ten percenting?

"I say it is this union business, Jan. They'll be your ruin! A bunch of racketeers and Reds!" That was the final punch line. She stopped herself, however. There was a look to Jan that she had never seen before. It was as though he stared beyond the kitchen, beyond the red geraniums.

He spoke quietly, as though to himself:

"They're asking summer wages, no matter what the season. No business can survive that kind of waste and excess. Besides, I would be setting precedent—"

"Exactly!" said his mother firmly, though she had never heard the word. She moved the rocker to the window and sat down, next to Josie. "Did you hear what your husband said? He would be setting precedent. What do you say to that? Jan has to let them go. They're troubling him. They're stressing him. Just look at your poor husband, Josie. He'll have himself a heart

attack. The tension just never lets up. That's why I say: dismiss them."

"If you do that, Jan Neufeld" said Josie, speaking to her lap, "then Doctorjay will be so angry, he'll not speak to you for weeks. He will be hopping mad, now that he's married Abigail—"

"So?" Lizzy queried, looking glum, about to lose her argument. This was Jan's sorest point—what Doctorjay would say if he put down his foot and stopped the Donoghues and their extravagance. She, Lizzy, had already seen the healer hurry across the street, pretending his eyesight was failing, when Jan had waved to slow him down so he could help him choose a brand new color for his flivver.

Jan wrapped himself in silence. The drumming in his ears increased. The room was swaying gently. He felt disoriented and strangely afraid; she knew that his enormous appetite was gone.

"You won't land in the poorhouse," said Josie the barbarian, "if you give people not as fortunate as you a decent helping hand. Just as I always say to Abigail—"

That, too. All was not well in Doctorjay's patched household either. Since he had married Abigail, Doctorjay had been adrift politically and dangerously tilting to the Left. Of late, the healer went from house to house to tell astonished people: "There are two sides to every blasted story. The Donoghues are not as bad as everybody thinks. They have a point. They are Americans. Since they are frank and speak their minds, they have as many enemies as friends."

The wedding guests had come and gone, all bringing gifts and wishes. Now there was litter in the yard; hillbilly music blared from the Victrola. Odd people camped in tents beneath the trees and ate the plums that Noralee, may she rest in her grave, had nursed up from her precious seedlings.

When, after a tense meal, the bonesetter came knocking on Jan's heart one final time to beg forbearance for the rascals, no matter what the price, Jan pondered, undecided. He knew he

owed his friend a lifetime of advice. Now was the time to pay it back.

"I vouch for those two boys of Abigail's," said Doctorjay, a man who always kept his word.

"They're handing out pink pamphlets."

"I'll put a stop to it."

"They're seeding discontent."

"I know. I know. They're the rotten apples in my barrel. Jan, give them one more chance. As a personal favor to me."

Jan nodded with reluctance. He knew the formula: if you put people out of work, in idleness they only cooked up further mischief.

"Thanks, pal! That will restore my household peace."

Jan, who had struggled through a sleepless night, torn between doing right and going easy, called back the Donoghues. He kept them on against his better judgment, right through the slump of a very bad harvest—which meant that he had moved the discontent on which the have-nots throve, right into his own mill.

Now tension grew around the silos and, more than once, police cars came on screeching tires to haul the scoundrels off to jail to let them cool their heads and heels. Abigail pouted, and Doctorjay fled farther from reality. In short, it was a mess.

Lizzy made sure that she visited daily. She came with a walker, but visit she did. It was clear that a serious matter troubled Jan's mind. What it was, she was dying to know. That's why she came, to find out.

"I have no choice but to suspect the Jews behind this union talk," she told him one last time.

Jan's thoughts were miles away. "I hope that you are wrong."

"I'm not. That's what the Elders say. The Hebrews have stirred up the Donoghues. That bunch of shady swindlers!"

"Mom—"

"The good life does not fall like manna from heaven. It has to be earned by the sweat of one's brow."

Josie lifted her head in surprise at the edge in Lizzy's voice. "What's wrong, Lizzy? Anything wrong?"

"You ask what's wrong? I'll tell you. A weight is on my mind." Lizzy swallowed hard and waited for that odd, disturbing ripple that, in moments such as this, would run along her spine and end up in her toes. "I feel a premonition."

"What kind of premonition?"

Lizzy wouldn't let herself be calmed. "Jan's got to let them go. The Donoghues are trouble. The Jews are running them. The Jews give them their slogans. I hate to say this, Jan, but they're chiselers. I say enough is enough. It doesn't take a genius to know that trouble's brewing. Somewhere. Life doesn't come to anyone served on a silver platter—"

"Don't worry, Mom. I'm a cautious man."

She spoke from raw, chill instinct. She and her people were this country's spine, and if you snapped that spine, the body politic would wreck.

"You couldn't ever please them. Never! Not even Herbert could. Remember? Herbert used to hire them while they were still in school to help out with the summer chores. A pointless exercise in generosity. You give them generosity—they'll ask for more and more. They multiply like rabbits, all waiting to be fed on generosity."

Old Lizzy was at her wit's end. She, who had helped to tame and build this land, was staring at a five percenter? Her children and her children's children lived and worked and flourished in the Dakotas. In Nebraska. Manitoba. Saskatoon. Ontario. Was that success, or what? And they? The Donoghues? Thrift and frugality? No. Order and decency? Never. They merely stepped up their catcalls. They agitated for a two-day weekend—they might just get it, too!

"Jan! Listen, son! You don't need the Donoghues. Let them try selling apples."

"I'll keep an eye on them."

"I say: just let them go."

"Mom, will you let me do the worrying? Are you taking the

pills Josie ordered for you?"

"A dime a pill? Not me!" A mystery elixir, that's what she took, concocted from crushed toad. Old age might be wasting her body, but surely not her spirit, which glowed as warmly and as surely as the dry buffalo chips she still remembered clearly.

"I hear," said Josephine, for her part on the warpath by that time, "the unions are gaining support."

"That's nonsense. Who said that?"

"I read the papers from Topeka," said Josie evenly, "to keep myself informed."

"If you must read," cried Lizzy, warm coffee in her belly, therefore mileage in her soul, "why don't you read those books that have a happy ending? Where everything is sorted out?"

She shocked herself with that attack, but it felt sweet. Oh, it felt wonderful! The morning was still young; the air was raw and biting; it burned Old Lizzy's tongue and ran into her stomach like a flame.

"It's still the Reds? You still are partial to the Bolshies? When will you ever learn?"

She hadn't meant to speak out loud or be so critical, but words had a way of escaping, like smoke ascending through an opening left in a dilapidated roof. "An eight- hour day, that's what they want? A forty hour week? Are you kidding me?"

"That's right. What's wrong with that? In Russia—"

Ah! Finally some sparks, to spice the day a bit! Lizzy knew enough about the vagaries of human nature to know that trouble was afoot. Big trouble. Huge. And chances were that it was marital.

She rushed to Jan's side mentally. Her instincts told her clearly: here was a weary husband, worrying his head over the agitation at the mill, the rabbits' damage to the grain, the interest on his business loans, and what did Josie say? What did Josie do? She sided with the Communists and Jews!

"That's what you get," she scolded, wagging an old finger, "for putting poetry ahead of prayer. For preferring the typewriter's rattle to the hum of a sewing machine. Did I not warn you,

Josephine? Your Bolshie organizers—"

"My Bolshie organizers!" cried Josie, stricken by blatant betrayal. "What did you say? You said my Bolshie organizers?"

"The Finkelsteins are not your friends?"

"They are my friends. They aren't Red."

"I am amazed she doesn't wield a pitch fork," said Lizzy to herself. She knew what she knew, which was plenty. Now it was up to her to channel that abundant energy of Josephine's into constructive, useful channels. The Elder Dewey's basement was deluged with lady volunteers, all multipying Christian cheer.

"We have to start planning for Thanksgiving baskets! We'll send two big ones to the Donoghues. We'll hide some cash inside. We'll pack an extra basket for Estella, who has another bastard in her belly. The Holy Season is as fine a time as any—" That was the one advantage of old age: yours was the final word. "—as fine a season as they come to share your blessings with the poor."

Josie put both fingers in her ears, but Lizzy hadn't finished.

"Take Little Melly," shouted Lizzy. "A volunteer, as eager as they come. Her recipes are legend! Her hair, still hardly gray! I can still see her catching butterflies with Jan down by the river bank—"

Josie jumped up then, charged head to toe with a turbulent fury.

"Now, Josie! Josie!" Lizzy cried, elated. "Why, every time I mention Little Melly—" and Josie fell back in her chair.

And Jan! A helpless man who lived and died and never had a clue as to that source of energy that fueled two angry females. He tried to intervene, to no avail at all: "Why argue back and forth on such a fine and sunny day?"

"Right. Josie, dear, how is your calendar?"

"My calendar is full."

"The County Fair is just around the corner."

"Which one? Another hodgepodge fair?"

"You could chair the committee."

"I already serve on seven committees. I counted them up.

Now I beg to be counted out!"

"Just do your bit," said Lizzy primly. "Just do your bit for charity. Just help us spread Thanksgiving cheer."

"Me? Hah!"

"If nothing else, you could stuff Dewey's envelopes—"

"No! No, I say! Stuff envelopes?"

"Make decorations, then."

"That's where I draw the line!"

"Just take it easy. Take it easy. Let Rarey climb up in the attic to see what's in the boxes you stacked away last year—" She, Lizzy, had eyes in her head, though misty more often than not. Jan had his mill, his workers, and his worries; he did not need a labor union argument right in his well-scrubbed kitchen. "All of a sudden, I don't feel so good—" If worst came to worst, she could always fall into a faint. It never failed. It didn't now. She made the most of it. Both Jan and Josie jumped up to assist. A chair went over. Jan cried out in panic: "Mother, sit here. Sit! Sit by the window here!" And Josie cried, too: "Quick, Rarey! Run! Where are the pills the Wichita doctors prescribed?"

"The pills? The pink pills?"

"Did you hide them again? Did you take them as you were supposed to?"

"I forget if I did or I didn't," murmured Lizzy, victorious in martyrdom. "These days, my memory comes and goes. Just comes and goes. *Ach,* children!"

Why put your faith in pills from Wichita or wills left in some tackle box? She kept her medications and her documents stacked in a corner of her cupboard where she just never ever looked—except perhaps but twice a year, at spring and fall cleaning. That way, you could ignore them.

"I follow Doctorjay's instructions," moaned Lizzy, slumping. "He tells me what to do. Pure honey and boiled onions. An hour before bedtime. It never fails. Tomorrow, I'll be good as new."

"Come live with us," said Jan, now hovering. "So we can keep an eye on you."

"Yes, do," said Josie, not too graciously. "You're living here already. You might as well move in."

Old Lizzy looked at Jan and Josephine through faded, swimming eyes. She fanned herself with a napkin, awaiting contradiction. "No, no. I better not. I might be underfoot."

"Why, Mom! The very thought!"

"I may be old, but I cling to my pride as long as I can." She, Lizzy, was in splendid form. Life still had plenty of excitement. "Let go of my arm, Josephine!"

The stairs? A minor obstacle! After such a spicy argument, she was unwilling to go back to being a mere mortal.

Perhaps she'd head straight down to Little Melly's porch on this fine, shiny morning and get her all hopped up as well? "Oh! By the way. Before I forget. Your snapdragons, Josie! They do look kind of peaked—"

And with that last, fine parting shot, Old Lizzy headed to the spinster to unload everything.

# Chapter 66

The teacher hovered close. "Who's plotting sabotage against the Party?"

"How should I know? I cannot tell," lied Mimi, despairing of her clumsy tongue that slung itself around Low-German diphthongs as though they were thick ropes. It was no secret to the little Pioneer that agents of the Soviet had started shadowing the twins, just waiting for an opportunity to pounce on them and catch them at their prayers.

No wonder Mimi hated praying. That loathsome habit, she decided, was worse than being pawed at by the brigade foreman, who had tried.

She loved her brothers, though, and hence she shielded them. She still looked at them with adoring eyes.

"Does anybody know," the teacher asked, not one to give up easily, "a traitor in our midst who, in the past, has had forbidden dealings with a foreigner?"

"I do not even have a clue," insisted Mimi skillfully, remembring to smile —remembering that hungry, rainy after-

noon when Dewey had come visiting to settle a belated score. She still remembered him, the fat American—the wet wind blew his whiskers sideways! When she remembered him that way, she always doubled up with laughter.

His brand of Faith was anything but joy. The mystic Savior whom he served up by dipping in those burlap sacks—bypassing her, no matter what that rodent did, deep in her empty belly!—would be forevermore as far from her emotions as Siberia.

The teacher had a lot to say, and all of it was cutting. Her voice became louder and louder. "If there are traitors in our midst, somebody has to turn them in. It might as well be you."

"We all agree. All traitors must be punished."

"The kulaks are a sore on our Mother Russia's body," the teacher bellowed frantically, and Mimi smiled at that as well, with all her might, for she was sharp, her mind was full of images.

She split her soul in half. She lived in two different worlds. She sloughed off one as she entered the other. A heady freedom, an exquisite pleasure, as right as gentle rain that fell upon a lake, came to her inner world when she played someone other than herself.

She was still young, but already she knew: "What I say is only what I say. It's simply empty blabber."

She knew that when the teacher pried: "Who is still prey to superstition?" and when she, Mimi, echoed faithfully: "Who might that be? Among us, who could be so foolish?" words were just words. Just that, and only that.

She learned to have one part of her, detached, observe the other as it compromised. She was a loyal and enthusiastic patriot rooting for the Soviet cause by day and the Lord's furtive child at night as she watched silently while those at Apanlee still prayed, with twisted faces, heaving chests: "Deliverance! Deliverance! Dear Lord, let us survive!"

That's what she heard as she grew up, but her heart had grown hard as a rock. To Mimi, the Gospel meant nothing.

She watched when Natasha knelt before her last icon, and held her breath as she kissed it She marveled at Marleen, who still had Faith, despite experience—that must have taught her: "Faith is sham!"—whose voice no longer cracked. She watched the twins thumb the Forbidden Book and glimpsed how something struck—a spark so pure, so genuine it kindled a prophetic light that started glowing deep within, much like a consecrated candle in a catacomb.

All that was there. She sensed it vividly. Yet they were of the past. The future was hers to grasp tightly.

She was earning high honors in class, a choice pupil endorsed by the Party.

"If you hear someone finding fault with our illustrious government, you better come running and tell. Report it at once. Report it in full. An extra star awaits you."

"I will."

"Reporting is your moral duty. Somebody has to do it. It might as well be you."

She knew that the entire German neighborhood was shivering beneath the Party's bedraggled red banners; the hammer and sickle, the malevolent Red energy that never gave out. There was no escaping; the abyss widened daily; her family stood at the brink. A dry and bony hand was closing on their necks.

At home, her pious brothers said, while practicing their parables: "Now spread your little fingers, love. Keep still and count to five. We'll help you think of five good answers next time the teacher asks you to report—"

"If need be," said the teacher, while winding up her lesson for the day, "you, too, will vote on who will live and who will die. Now, is that clearly understood?"

She was chilling at what that might mean.

She listened to her brothers pray in furtive whispers and let their prayers seep into her pores until the trees, the meadows, and the clouds above began to melt. She listened and she disapproved in principle, but here was a bedeviled question mark:

How could those two be a disgrace to Russia?

So they had faults? She saw their faults with eyes of love. She did most anything they asked.

She ran their errands, tremblingly. That slip of paper in her pocket? A cryptic map: she clutched it in her palm. It showed the neighbors where to meet in secrecy so they could kneel as well and be replenished in the Lord.

Yet she was was proud of her Pioneer scarf. She was small, and she wanted to please. If her Pioneer leader discovered her treason, she would be cursed and abused.

When she sat down to analyze her sad predicament—to have Faith and be a part of Apanlee, or be a proper Soviet citizen, free of all inner chains and shackles—her scales tipped neatly toward freedom. She had a life to live; she did not choose to live beneath a cloud about to burst and soak her to the marrow.

All this was intertwined for the young Pioneer, precariously balanced as she stood between her need to be a child in someone's lap, curled up and purring like a kitten, and a devoted Pioneer, not falling short of Party expectations. The daily tug that pulled her every which way as she was growing up—the Party's dictum on the one hand, her brothers' fervor for the Gospel on the other—felt like the aching of her limbs, felt like the rising of the rivers swelling with the coming of the rains, felt like the grave stones of her ancestors, made out of granite, moldy now, who had built Apanlee. She almost lost herself.

She watched Larissa change.

Faith had at long last touched Larissa and made her lively and young; it briefly made her beautiful. She held the twins enthralled.

She glowed like an ember, dispensing fragrance, warmth, and light. "The Holy Spirit led me. I could not have done it alone," she readily admitted.

Ah! Hallelujah time! Let the sea roar. Let the floods clap their hands. Let the hills all be joyful together!

The twins linked hands with Mimi and told her, smiling:

"See?"

Her brothers were the Lord's own laborers, who chafed by day until the skin peeled from their palms, who frequented the hungry for the Lord by night, who met with faithful souls in darkened rooms, in secret corners, who had committed to the crown of thorns for the sake of the Savior they loved.

Her brothers said, encircling her: "The Lord is our shepherd, dear. The Gospel tells us clearly—"

The teacher said: "A preacher is a parasite. Two preachers are two parasites. As hazardous as fire."

The government inspector who showed up next at Apanlee was in a nasty mood. His little eyes roamed greedily. He told the twins that he had reason to believe some farmers in the area had sabotaged the quota yield set to alleviate the shortages of seed, now more acute than ever.

The twins stood tall. They had grown strong enough, by then, to hold their own against most any bureaucrat.

"We don't know what you mean."

This one did not back off. "Show us your ration cards."

"What ration cards? We don't need ration cards. The earth grows anything we need."

The Party agent shivered in his overcoat despite the newsprint he had stuffed into his shirt to break the blasts of winter. He spoke derisively: "Did you report your surplus yield to the newly formed village committee?"

"We meet our needs without the help of government, as we have always done."

"You criticize obliquely? Be careful with your words."

The twins just shrugged. The snoopers multiplied.

At first, they were just smug and meddlesome and talked of Liberty, Fraternity, Equality—but soon that changed. That changed! In yet another season, they looked as though they packed bees in their pockets, with stingers still intact.

They drew this farmer, that farmer aside to mock them first, then scold, then threaten, then tempt them with their offers.

"You! Let's be frank. If you help us on the kolkhoz, together we'll accomplish miracles. You'll only have yourself to blame for what will happen next if you refuse to join. Why are you looking pained?"

"It's our land," the stubborn foreigners declared.

That was the sentiment. Their glances seemed to say: "Why would we want to feed a bird that's going to the block tomorrow?"

That kind of life was not worth living, the foreigners decided, and by the time the first Five-Year Plan rolled around, the Germans had closed ranks.

You could bend them. You could twist them. You could pinch them and harass them, but you could not break their spirit.

To walk behind a plow, to feel the richness of the soil between his toes, that was now the mandate for every German farmer worth his name. To delve into that fount of Faith that had sustained his forebears, that was his source of strength.

Ah! Faith in tomorrow by seeding today on the land that the Lord had bestowed on the creed!

That was the secret plan—to keep the seed alive: a small grain field between the tiny legal cabbage patch next to the house and the illegal chicken coop, well camouflaged. Just root by tiny root.

"You can't," the agents said.

Ah, no? If not today—well, surely then tomorrow.

When the detested quota agents came, someone always let out with a whistle.

These things were not said loudly, not even among themselves, but were widely understood. Their faces seemed to say: You have a lofty theory of social betterment. On our side, we have the prowess of our Lord who blows His breath onto the seed and causes it to burst.

So. Sabotage or not? Let history decide.

It is well documented, so they claim, that during Soviet Russia's early years, not many Germans could be found atop a

kolkhoz sleigh.

"A tax on the cow. A tax on the pig," the next official said soon afterwards when he arrived at Apanlee. He seemed to have plenty of time.

He rifled through boxes and drawers and dumped out one or two, but then he left, and no more came of that. Before he slammed the door, he growled: "If you think long and hard, you will discover why you're guilty."

The only thing he took with him that day was an old box containing Uncle Benny's cherished Josie-letters. As he passed through the hall, holding his find aloft as though it were a ticking bomb, behind him wafted a faint scent of Dorothy's bouquet—rose water from St. Petersburg, before it was called Petrograd.

"That scares you? Eh?" he laughed.

Outside stood an accomplice who took the box from him and stored it carefully. Natasha, watching from behind the curtains, saw that his eyes were full of milk. The cup fell from her fingers.

The Pioneer ran after him. "Wait! Wait! Whatever gave you that idea?"

She was the only one who found her tongue in time, but it is doubtful that he heard the tremor in her voice, and if he did, that he paid much attention.

"Someone around here," he said and tweaked her cheek, "is shirking work for public benefit. Think hard. Who might that traitor be?" He kept smiling at her without having a reason. She stood her ground while trembling in her socks.

He added nastily: "I know your ilk. All of you foreigners, ingrained and stubborn monarchists—"

She was so eager for his satisfaction she saw him to the gate and even opened it for him. "Look here! Look at my Stalin buttons!"

"It's us today," he told her murkily before he disappeared, "and all of you tomorrow."

Natasha shrugged repeatedly when she was told she could improve her lot by spying on Marleen.

"We are your friends!" the quota agents told her, while paying her sly compliments. "We'll make a decent human being out of you. You're as good as any citizen. It's freedom now, Natasha. It's Liberty. Fraternity. Equality."

"What is this? A grim joke?"

Could freedom buy her anything she didn't own already? She had her family. The hard, gray years had welded them; their lives were now interwoven.

"Rich with manure, the soil of Apanlee," the agents said, and let the words sink in.

Natasha pondered that as well. She listened sullenly.

The only thing she wanted for herself was this: a heated brick for her cold feet when she came back from queuing. Marleen made sure of it. "My feet hurt," she could whine, just as Marleen had done, in her own haughty days, and somebody ran for a towel in which to wrap that brick: Here, rest your legs on this fine antique stool, Natasha!

"They're using you, exploiting you."

She had nothing to say in reply. Her answers were hopelessly vague.

"Well. Think it over. Will you?"

She snorted with derision. Her nose was stuffed with so-called freedom, which wasn't worth a kopeck, and maybe even less. She had no use at all for people telling her how she could smuggle secret messages and thus improve her standing. She bristled at the thought.

"What do you say? Is it a deal? We need to have a serious talk. Why are you working for the Germans? When is enough enough?"

"Get lost. And don't come back again!"

The Party's agents visited Natasha repeatedly to talk to her about her future and the important role she could assume, if she

so chose, in helping Russia to renew.

She'd just thrust out her lower lip. She wanted none of that.

They promsied they would help her build a pig sty big enough to hold two hundred sows. "It's science now," they told her.

*"Nu. Nu,"* Natasha said.

They were a stubborn lot, like pesky horse flies, all. She knew precisely how to turn the mule. She knew the art of silence.

"Natasha, can we count on you? You could help us enormously. We know that you came from a horseless family. You're lucky. You have no class blemish, Natasha—"

She kept stalling, assessing her chances. "A litter of piglets?"

"Of course."

"What else?"

"You write your ticket now."

When they assailed her with the argument that millions had martyred themselves so she could join a state-owned farm and be the equal of her former masters, she burst into loud laughter. Was she a weathercock?

She didn't lack for gratitude, nor was she missing recognition. In the starvation years, there had been nights so cold she and Marleen had slept together in one bed, arms wrapped around each other.

"You are a loyal citizen. Is that not true, Natasha?"

"What do you take me for? Just leave me out of it."

As though he'd been Russian courtier, one agent even tried to kiss her hand.

"We need to know who's plotting to destroy our country's reconstructive efforts—"

What did he want from her? Do violence to her bunions and make her march all day behind the bloody banners? Report suspicious behavior by the terrorized people she loved?

She pointed out for the tenth time that she was family; she had her place at Apanlee; she was expected now to take a weekly bath, like everybody else—and whether she required it or not.

"I even claim the wash tub first," she told them boastfully. She walked through any door she pleased. The burdens of inequity had largely disappeared, if they had ever bothered her at all.

The agent smiled at her—a smile that did not reach his eyes. "You still don't understand. You have no choice. You must report to us who is concealing stolen property—"

She let fly a spitball or two; she had practiced a few in her time. She flew at him with many curses. She lashed him with her tongue.

"Get lost," Natasha yelled. "And don't come here again."

"I am your equal now as well," she could have said to any bureaucrat, and used her elbows, too. And no one would have argued. But this she learned, though slowly: you did not argue with the government. Not if you valued life.

Nobody spoke against the Soviet government—unless you were a fool.

The chorus of the agents' accusations never stopped. Who kept surplus potatoes hidden in his cellar? Who hoarded beans? Who seeded barley, oats, and rye?

"The Easter bunny," said Natasha. When censured and rebuked, she looked demure and dim. She just fell quiet and stayed that way, no matter what the lure.

The agents said: "You won't be reasonable, Citizen? You'll only have yourself to blame if there's a price to pay."

Four agents surrounded her soon afterwards and whispered each other their cues. They looked like four hard-bitten dogs. Over tobacco an offer emerged.

"Here's what you do. Here's what we'll do for you—" The agent grinned, for he was confident. He grinned and kept on grinning.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Come on, now. Smile at me. You had a son once. Right? We know a thing or two."

"What are you saying, Citizen? We know about his past.

Why beat about the bush?"

Natasha was treading with care now. Her instincts responded. The corners of her mouth pulled downwards.

"Anything," the agents told her carefully, "can happen. Anything. Just anything."

"He vanished years ago. He did not leave a trace."

"Citizen, it's up to you. The offer is good for three weeks."

Something inside her quailed. "All that is a patchwork of lies."

"If I were you—"

"All that was yesterday. Tomorrow is tomorrow." She hardly ever thought about her wastrel son, though when she did, strong fingers pressed against her windpipe until she gasped for air.

She chose to count Dominik dead. She hoped he'd fallen bravely.

# Chapter 67

The government inspectors multiplied, and all were heartless with the Germans. They told them, sneeringly: "The Kremlin has dispatched us to bear a personal message. You may not like it much, but you will join a kolkhoz willingly before this year is gone."

Before they left, they checked the wash house, wall to wall. They checked the barn. The attic. Next, the cellar.

They told Marleen: "Come to the registration desk tomorrow."

Now all was ration cards—not just for bread but salt, shoes, yarn, screws, bolts and buttons.

She walked on foot into the nearest town to stand in line to register, with Mimi next to her. Behind her walked Larissa, followed at a short distance by Natasha. By then, a woman still felt relatively safe to go and ask for ration cards, whereas a man did not. To be a male from Apanlee meant being targeted for torment.

Therefore, the twins stayed home—why be a double light-

ning rod? It was no longer safe to let the sun shine on their faces, now that they had a blood-red check mark by their names.

By then, Marleen was nearly blind with hatred. Steadfast, she surrendered nothing. She had by no means lost the game.

"Last name?" the ration card inspector asked Marleen. The tormentor expertly launched himself. In Moscow, they noticed his zeal. His voice grew thick and menacing. He rose and stood behind her. She could not see his face.

"I'm waiting, Citizen."

"My name is Neufeld. Marleen Neufeld."

"With *umlaut*?"

"No. No *umlaut*."

"No *umlaut*? All Germans have an *umlaut*. Born what?"

"Born Fröse."

"With *umlaut*?"

The heat rose in Marleen's gaunt face. "With *umlaut*. Yes. Not that it matters, Citizen."

"It matters. Ah! It matters. That's how we tell. That's how we recognize imperialists." He gripped her by her shoulders. "Here is a chair. Sit in the middle of the room so we can see you better. So we can study you and weigh your answers properly." His thumbs lay on her collarbone. "So you're a foreigner? A trickster? Don't try to deceive me. I want you to know that my patience is short."

"What do you want to know?"

" Just how, exactly, are you harming our Soviet Motherland?"

Her hands lay in her lap. Only her knuckles whitened. She kept her voice as steady as she could. "I am not harming anyone. I was born here, in the Ukraine. So were my parents. So were my grandparents. From all I know, the Fröses have been loyal Russian citizens for seven generations—"

"How many males still in your family?" His hands were on her neck. He was massaging it. His thumbs made circling motions.

"Two sons."

"No! You don't say!"

"Fine citizens, *tovarich*. With not a single blemish on their names."

He let go of her then. He sat himself across from her, leaned back in his chair, smirked briefly, and rested both heels on the table. "Two preachers, so we hear?"

"No. Not ordained. They never were ordained."

"Look out of the window," he ordered. "Citizen! What do you see?"

"My eyes are weak."

"I'll lend you mine." His small eyes were liquid with spite. "You see the Park of Glorious Victories. Is that not right? Is that not what you see?"

"She does. She does," cried Mimi, stepping forward eagerly.

"What else?"

"She sees the statue of our Father Lenin, his image mounted on a truck."

The agent smiled at Mimi through a set of yellow teeth. "Is that a fact?"

"And my entire family," the teenager declared, her own voice thin and high, "admire him. We love him, and we honor him."

"How do we know? Where is your proof?"

The words came by themselves, for she had practiced them until they were as smooth as pebbles. This was familiar domain. "He is the man," insisted Mimi earnestly, "who spent his intellect to carry light to the oppressed—"

"That," hissed Natasha, furious, for she had taken all she could, now stepping forward, pinching Mimi, "is neither here nor there."

The ration card inspector studiously ignored Natasha. He fixed his yellow smile on Mimi's anxious face. "What else do you suppose your carrion mother sees? Patrolling the streets? Hands on their guns?"

"*Tovarich*—"

"Soviet guards, right?"

"Right."

"Armed?"

"Right."

"And on the lookout for our country's spies, diversionists and traitors?"

Marleen had doubts that she would ever calm herself enough to speak, but she said hoarsely, shaking: "We're patriotic citizens. We love this land. We always have. We always will. Not one of us ever would dream of destroying our country—"

There was a pause. Her tormentor drummed his knuckles. He tested the trap before it was sprung.

"All right. All right. Let's say that I believe you. At least I do for now. Why not? Here is another question, Citizen—" He paused to give his question added weight. "Did you, or did you not, write begging letters to a distant relative in Kansas? Her name, as I recall, was Josephine?"

Fear came in a great wave. Marleen tried hard to keep her voice from cracking. "It's been at least eight years. We corresponded casually."

"Is that a fact? What did she write about?"

"She wrote about reform. I didn't understand the details. I thought she just was being used by someone in America. She was somebody's mouthpiece. It never meant a thing."

"What do you know of her?"

"Not much. I never paid attention. She used to correspond at length with an old uncle, now deceased—"

"But you wrote back?"

"Just once or twice. It did not mean a thing."

"You begged for help. Had you no shame? When you wrote shameful letters to those American imperialists, what did you say to her? Were you and she engaged in secret plans? Did you and she hatch plans to sabotage our Motherland? Was she your uncle's ilk?"

"I barely knew this woman."

"Let's say I don't believe you."

"She was on your side, Citizen. It was my understanding that she was in favor of the Revolution—" explained Marleen. Her heart was swelling, getting thick. She caught and steeled

herself. She swallowed hard and added bitterly: "She was a humanist. We had nothing whatever in common. She wrote a lot of silly letters, all meant to gladden Uncle Benny's heart. I should have tossed them in the flames—"

"Why didn't you?"

"I guess I must have forgotten."

"Did you report the contents of those letters to the appropriate authorities?"

"No. Uncle Benny kept them in a box to which he had the only key—"

"You had no curiosity?"

"No. I did not. I couldn't have cared less. She was an odd and distant relative. She loved her books more than her neighbors. She may have borne our name; she was not one of us. Her mind ran in a different groove. Besides, all this was long ago—"

"—before the Revolution set us free—" said Mimi, smiling broadly.

The ration card inspector started pulling on his mustache: "Say! Have you ever heard of quotas?"

"Of course. I know the quota chart. It's hanging in my barn."

"The quota laws are strict."

"I know."

"They are our firm, established rules. I have some excellent advice for you. Just try to do your share."

"I will."

Behind that mustache lurked a smile that simply wouldn't quit. "Your sons are on the list of people who are considered marginal—"

"That's wrong. That is unfair. My sons will gladly do their share, rebuilding Russia."

"It is no longer Russia. It is the Soviet Union."

"The Soviet Union, then."

"These days," he said, and stared hard at the Pioneer, "a proper citizen will want to do his share."

The Pioneer stood tall. To enter into combat on this man's terms would be foolish.

He started plucking on her earlobe. He loosened his belt and gave a soft belch.

"No telling what this country needs. No telling. Hear? Is that not right, my little dove? Speak up and tell the truth—"

"We all agree," said Mimi, "that we live in challenging times." She cast a sideways glance. Her mother had her own hands deeply buried in her pockets, but she could see the fists. Her mother's tormentor was snapping his suspenders. He faced Marleen at last, who could no longer trust herself to speak.

"You wouldn't want to be regarded as a wrecker, would you? You'll want to do your share? Your sons will want to do their share? Your daughter here will want to do her share? Natasha wants to do her share? We must chip in to help rebuild our Motherland. Is that not so?"

"It is."

"It's better that you understand that, Citizen."

"I do."

He kept twirling his pencil between thumb and pinkie. He spoke as slowly as he could while pulling thoughtfully on a short flint.

"Here's what you must remember: if your output falls short, your twin sons will be held accountable." He spun around. He started hurling charges. "If you speak up and tell us all, they will be spared. Well, are you ready to confess?"

"Confess to what?"

He started blowing smoke rings. He said, his eyes on Mimi: "What do they look like, your two brothers? What is their physical description?"

"Tall. Blond. Blue eyes. Impossible to tell apart. As alike as two peas in a pod."

"A steady gait? A firm jaw and an honest brow?"

"Yes," said Marleen. "Now that you mention it."

"Don't try to anger me. Don't think I can be easily confused. I have it from good sources that your two sons are secret spokesmen for a cult—"

Marleen's tongue curled itself against her palate. Her shoul-

ders slumped. She muttered hoarsely: "We've covered this already. I don't know what you mean—"

"Your sons don't qualify for ration cards, regrettably," he told her, tapping lightly. "Just so you understand that. Your sons are classified as parasites. Two worthless parasites, that's all. Without significance to our glorious nation—"

Plunk! went the rubber stamp, and left a bright red smear.

The agents shouted angrily: "Don't argue now! This is a criminal investigation. If you as much as look like running, we'll open fire. Now, is that clearly understood?"

"We have established," said the government officials, for example, to Hans Friesen, one of Marleen's most trusted neighbors, "that you, your sons, your grandsons, your father and your uncles are documented traitors to the Motherland—"

The German farmer stood before them, shaking. "I never once—" His roots in the Ukraine had grown into the very bedrock of the land his great-grandfather had claimed. "I don't know what—"

The agents had a lot to say, and none of it was pleasant. When they were finished, nobody spoke until the agents jeered:

"Why are you lying, Citizen? We came with documented proof."

"What proof?"

"Five years ago, you wickedly salted away a whole pig." They started shouting, viciously: "Confess! Admit your guilt. Admit you are a saboteur. We'll find out soon enough."

Before the week was out, a toady pointed a stiff finger to a cattle train and said to the whole Friesen family: "Siberia will teach you respect."

They were the first but not the last. In years to come, by the hundreds and thousands, they vanished. The Germans all vanished. They vanished.

Everywhere in the vicinity of Apanlee, the grain inspectors climbed atop the roofs and peered into the chimneys, looking for

evidence of criminally hidden grain. They ransacked the cellars as well as the attics. They stripped down the wash house. They combed through the barns, looking for kernels hidden in the straw. They dumped out every drawer. Their voices grew louder and louder.

"Arrested for suspected sabotage," they told a German farmer whose name was Hannes Voth.

"But why—?" asked Hannes Voth. Above his brow, an anarchist's knife had gouged out a deep scar. He was still young, not yet fifty, but terror, ruin and grief had made of him an ancient invalid. He was half-blind by then and almost deaf, but still he heard and saw, and what he didn't hear and see he started to imagine.

A toady took him by the arm: "May Comrade Stalin live to be a hundred. We know you are a spy. We know that for a fact."

The victim raised a feeble argument. He stammered; his conscience was clear. He loved his country, Russia; he wouldn't ever harm the land and its inhabitants.

"Shut up!" The guards knocked him down, but he struggled to stand. The grain inspector had a camel's nose above a boastful smile. He started shouting loudly: "It's now official, Citizen. There's nothing you can do. We have your confession, all spelled out already. The only thing we need now is your signature. Don't give us any gall."

The hapless farmer tried to reason. "How can I be a spy? I never left my acres—"

The agent seized him by his beard and started pulling hard. "Don't you remember, Citizen? As though it happened yesterday! You wished us ill. You sabotaged morale. You indulged in seditious talk. In the name of Joseph Stalin, you are arrested, Citizen—"

"Not even in my dreams," the German farmer argued, terrified, "did I have a seditious conversation—"

"Then what about your sons?"

The words froze on the victim's lips. His heart sank to his heels. It turned so quiet that you could hear him chewing on his

tongue. "My sons?"

"That's right. Your sons. Don't you still have three sons?"

In happier days, his wife had given birth to seven sons, each healthier than the other. He had three left—three youngsters in their teens, not even old enough to shave. The rest were dead and gone. One son lay in a shallow grave somewhere, a victim of the civil war. Typhus had swept away two more. A fourth had died of hunger.

"—where are your three remaining sons? Where are you hiding them? Behind your hoarded grain? This moment, we demand an answer!"

"There is no grain. It's true. My word is solid granite—"

"We'll help you," said the serpentines. "All of you people, saboteurs and royalists! All of you, German swine! We'll help you to remember!"

The blows of rifle butts and cudgels brought out the first, who cowered underneath a bed as though he were a cur. It was a wintry afternoon; the agents made short shrift.

They took the youngster by the elbow and walked him down the street; no one saw what happened afterwards and, worse, none dared to ask. He disappeared and was not seen again.

He was the first, that anguished day, but by no means the last.

"Now. Has your memory returned? Where are the other two?"

The German moved his lips, but not a word came out. His fingers jerked as though they touched live coals. His face looked like a coast, ceroded by invisible waves. "Take me, instead. I'll follow willingly."

"Do we need carrion? You're old. What use have we of you?"

The agents whispered to each other. This went on for a while. "Don't say we didn't warn you," the grain inspector hissed, at last, surrounded by his underlings. "We're writing a reminder to ourselves to check on you periodically. We will discover before long where you have hidden your two sons, and where you're hiding grain—"

They found the second the next week, hiding in a neighbor's attic. They took him outside, barefoot. They backed up the truck in which they had come, and started the engine, which rattled. They leaned the shaking boy against the barn.

"Now's the time to speak and tell us of your father's treachery," they coaxed, but not for long. The first shot sent the youngster to his knees. The next tore up his belly. The third hit well enough so that he crumpled and lay still. This happened in broad daylight, as many people watched.

The father heard the crackling of the shots, inside the house, where two men held him, buckled, on the floor. The grain inspectors came back in and stood him upright, several times, much like a shock of wheat that wouldn't hold together.

"Now. Has your memory returned?"

The German scanned the faces that surrounded him. Not one of them showed mercy. His thoughts flew into disarray. "It's true. I hid some grain. I now confess. I swear the only thing I ever did was try to feed my family. I know now that was treason—"

The agent had a row of upper teeth, all large and yellow and decayed. He wore a self-satisfied smile.

"See? There you go. You didn't act alone, did you?"

"Nobody else—"

"You stashed away your grain? Who helped you plot your crimes? Who helped you hide your harvests?"

"But I—"

"It's up to you," the grain inspector said. He leaned against the door frame to scratch his back befittingly. "There's still one left. You have a week. Who else was plotting to destroy the Soviet recovering economy? If I were you, I'd think that answer over carefully."

Then they came for the last. They arrived a few minutes to midnight. They pulled the fifteen-year-old from the attic and led him out into the orchards, hands tied behind his back.

They said: "Two minutes. That is all."

They revved up the engine again. At that, the German farmer Hannes Voth, once prosperous beyond a farming man's most fearless dreams, a model citizen by all accounts, confessed that he had sabotaged the harvest.

The lesson was not lost on anyone. Amazing stories spilled out tales of wholesale espionage, of counter-Revolutionary plots, defeatist conversations and terrorist connections. Some openly confessed to being spies, and others to spreading corruption.

Not a few now admitted that they had plotted wickedly to blow up mines and factories. There was no end to it.

It was not wise, even a slow-wit realized, to trifle with an accusation—it grew by what it fed on: arrests and more arrests. The files grew fat and fatter. The ranks of the Germans grew thin.

These were bitterly desperate times for Marleen. She stayed in the background and kept her head down—relieved in a sick, twisted way that the firing squads in prison courtyards in every major town did not yet aim and rip apart her own sons' pulsing hearts.

The terror had fallen on somebody else. There was still reprieve for her sons. The local censor still smiled on her daughter, Mimi, a splendid Soviet Pioneer. And Mimi still smiled back.

Investigators came repeatedly to Apanlee, with crow bars and with dogs, to search for hidden grain. They stalked through the entire manor, tracking mud through every room. They stomped their boots across the wooden floors of Apanlee and cried:

"A hollow sound. Where is the grain? Where is the grain?"

"No grain," Marleen told them repeatedly, but still they climbed into her attic. They rummaged her stables and rifled her pantry. They even leaped into her cellar and dug into the brine where Marleen kept the gherkins she had harvested with luck and skill despite a tardy spring.

They shouted themselves hoarse: "Where is the grain? Where is the grain?" exchanging telling glances.

They searched the barn and the abandoned chicken coop, run-

ning their bayonets into the mildewed straw. The searchers hectored angrily: "The grain. The grain. Say, Citizen. Where did you hide your grain?"

"There is no grain," Marleen kept telling them, but they took bench marks of the chimney in her parlor room and checked behind the double window frames. They swarmed throughout the orchards; they smashed the dishes in the summer kitchen and left the pieces on the floor. Wherever they discovered a suspicious-looking site, in went the crow bar, poking and probing.

"Confess you fed it grain," they hollered even at Natasha, while slashing at a rooster's crop with knives that glittered in the sun. "Confess you are a traitor, saboteur and terrorist. Explain the why and hows—"

They sat down in Marleen's kitchen to thaw their toes out by her fire. "We're here to discuss serious matters. Well, are you ready to confess?"

They used long sentences to taunt, humiliate, and threaten. They started blowing smoke so thick it was hard to see their faces.

"We know a thing or two. We know most everything. Confess! You harmed your Motherland. Help us unravel your son's crime when they hid grain in bottles in the water—"

The afternoon turned gray, then black.

"We know they've hidden the grain. We know they've slaughtered livestock. How can you refuse us? Out with the truth! Why be so secretive? Could it be your sons were waiting for high prices in the spring? By covering for them, you make yourself a thief. A saboteur. A criminal. A counter-Revolutionary who's robbing our glorious Soviet state!"

"But never once—"

"We know how you disguise yourselves, you traitors! Why be so stubborn? Why be cross? The New World Order has arrived."

They went at her, hammer and sickle.

All the Party agents were soon in a dangerous mood. Their voices grew louder and louder.

"Speak up. Who else? Who's hiding in the bosom of your family? How many females? Altogether?"

"My daughter, Mimi. Five stars of merit to her name—"

"Who else?"

"This woman here. Larissa is her name."

"A relative?"

"No. Strictly speaking, no."

"What's that? A trick? You think that we are easily confused? It says here that she has your name. Therefore, she must be related. Speak up. Confess! Is she a relative or not? Spare me your boastful history. Who else?"

"Natasha, over there. A former serv—"

"My mother," whispered Mimi, now pulling the investigator's sleeve, "has some peculiar quirks."

A glint came to his eyes. "Is that a fact?"

"All of her thoughts are nebulous," reported Mimi expertly. "She sits with her head in her hands. She fantasizes lavishly—"

He tried to pull the Pioneer onto his knees. "Aha! Now we're getting somewhere. Now we are getting nearer to the truth. She's not a worthy parent? She makes you say things you'd rather not say? She makes you do things you know you shouldn't do?"

The Pioneer smiled prettily while raising one eyebrow and winking at him. "Why would I give away my secrets?"

His hand massaged her thigh. "Well, try. It cannot hurt to try. Why don't you tell me one?"

"She isn't harming anyone," said Mimi. "Trust me. She's living in the past. Believe me, Citizen. Her memory is dim. Her mind is like a sieve."

"She has forgotten how she plotted to embezzle property belonging to the State?"

The Pioneer was not deceived. Her head was tilted to one side, coquettishly. "I can be trusted, Citizen."

She shrugged him off expertly while sliding off his lap. "Now, listen. Here's the plan—" She shifted eagerly from foot to foot. "Just count on me. I will report to you. I'll keep an eye on her."

The toady stared at her. "You are alert and well-informed? How old are you? When was the last time you reported a suspi-

cious relative? How many traitors, all in all, have you exposed so far?"

She grinned as broadly as she could. "Is anyone above suspicion? Including you, *tovarich*? "

"That's neither here nor there," Natasha said, who saw with her third eye. Now light and fire flashed in Natasha's veins as well. She started cuffing Mimi.

The Pioneer paid no attention. She winked at the interrogator: "I eavesdrop on the side."

"You could be useful, girl," he muttered. "Why don't I have a word with you? Alone?"

She was talking so fast that her words ran into each other. "I can be trusted. Ask. Ask anyone. In my brigade, I am a member in good standing. I take my orders from the Party. That's all I am allowed to say. You can depend on me. I know a thing or two."

"Well. Tell me this. This woman here? Natasha? Why does your mother call her a servant? There must be some compelling reason. Is she still being victimized?"

Marleen burst into laughter. Shrill. Natasha ducked, then lurched.

"Nobody dares exploit Natasha," Natasha trumpeted. "I'm now a liberated citizen. In fact, one of the best! Let that be clearly known."

The agent slammed the table with his fist so that the ink pot jumped. "Where do you sleep? Still in the fodder house?"

"By choice."

"Out with the truth! What is your pay?"

"They never paid me. Never!" explained Natasha eagerly. "They never have. They never will. I'm just as good as family. They treat me equally. Last week, I claimed the wash tub first before—"

"Do you sweep floors? Do they leave all the dirty work to you?"

"Just the family wash. Just that—" She glanced at Marleen for approval.

Marleen looked as though she were standing in ice water up to her armpits, chilled to her marrow, threadbare but proud. "It's

true. She still does the family wash," she said clearly. She stripped her daughter's clutching fingers from her arm. She struggled down a strangling lump. "She's one of us. We treat her well. She treats us well. We have never exploited her. Never! Is that not true, Natasha?"

*"Nu. Nu."*

"We always gave her choices. Why, even in the olden days when she was still a lowly chambermaid—"

"But you should see her now!" the Pioneer broke in. "She's making a name for herself. She walks from room to room and doesn't even knock."

"It's true!" Natasha smiled expansively. Ah! What a family! "I even slam the doors!"

How things had changed! Now they were putty in her hands. They were no longer stingy with her cast-offs. There was a fine umbrella, for example. In former days, Marleen would have held onto it, no matter how Natasha bawled. "I have it now," Natasha boasted, beaming. "It's my umbrella now."

The toady focused on Natasha. "Do you have relatives that you can call your own?"

"A son. She had a son." Marleen was fighting specks of light that danced behind her eyeballs.

"We know. His name was Dominik. We know the last small detail, and therefore—"

Natasha jumped, arthritic feet and all, into the middle of his sentence. She wrung her hands and started wailing loudly the moment people mentioned Dominik. "I take the blame. All. All of it. When he was small, I should have swaddled him more tightly—"

"Let's get right to the bottom of this matter. How did this woman treat your son?"

Marleen could not be stopped. She jumped up from her chair.

"You want the truth?" she shouted. "I boxed his ears when he was small. I should have lopped them off—" She looked like a woman demented.

"Aha! The truth at last! Now you are showing your true feelings. You didn't like him much?"

"Why should I have?"

"You brutalized, exploited, and abused your loyal servant's only son?"

"A hero of the Revolution, Dominik!" Natasha shouted, desperate. Marleen fell back into her chair, exhausted. "We are living in unnatural times," she said weakly.

"Natasha," argued Mimi, her own voice straining now, "used to be proud of her fine son. I vouch for that. I kept a notebook with remarks. To this day, she will brag how Dominik fought bravely. Regrettably, he's dead. We heard he was condemned to death for wounding a high officer. Natasha burst out sobbing—"

The Soviet agent scratched himself luxuriously—his lice gave him no rest. "What if you're mistaken?"

Marleen's white face was crumbling. Natasha, too, recoiled as though she had been struck.

The Pioneer pushed to the foreground, eagerly. "Out with the truth," said Mimi. She seemed no longer young. There was an edge to her young mouth the agent could not fail to notice. She told the scoundrel, leaning forward: "Look here. Why keep on playing cat and mouse? You have a file as well."

He savored every word. "He's dead? You think that Dominik is dead? That's what you think? That's what you hope? Well, you're in for a surprise. He escaped, I'm very pleased to say. He's alive and heading this way—"

"He is? Oh, *bozhe moi.* That is good news. Where is he now? What does he do?"

"The right arm of the Soviet," said the inspector slowly.

Natasha crossed herself in front of all. "Alive? Oh! Holy Mother Russia!"

"A proven Party man. Replete with uniform," the agent finished slowly. "Why should I keep on barking at you folks when I can keep a dog?"

# Chapter 68

The bucket brigades came racing, as did the fire trucks. Bright yellow flames leaped out of windows, while the neighbors leaped into their trousers as shouts went up the length of Mennotown:

"Fire!"

"Fire!"

"Fire at Jan's mill!"

It was a spectacular sight, a spooky night and a prophetic arson few Mennotowners would forget. Invisible hands threw fistfuls of sparks. The wheat dust, in seconds, became an inferno. The heat exploded the roof. The wind sat, howling, in the chimneys. The flames kept leaping through the embers. Burning shingles flew in every direction, and smoke bulged up toward the moon in mushroom after mushroom.

The night guard made it out through a window he knocked out with the toe of his boot. He ran over the roof, slid down to the ground, behind him his trailing suspenders.

"Fire! Help! Help! Fire!"

For hours, the air howled and sobbed and hooted and whistled and wept. Hundreds of window panes cracked. Red beams

of light kept fingering the sky, which glowed first purple, then yellow, then red, as if the sun were about to come up. The shingles on neighboring buildings ignited. A strangely persistent eastern wind, that smelled of uprooted earth, spread the heat and fanned the flames which seized upon the chicken shed, then jumped onto Jan's stables.

The fire burned five of Jan's packing sheds and fourteen brand new barracks, where extra bags of wheat were stacked. A newly-built silo collapsed. Now the roof of the tool house was gone.

The fire spread to Jan's and Josie's property. It collapsed in a shower of sparks. In stunned silence, Jan's neighbors watched his pride and joy burn down and wondered what he'd say and do once he had caught his breath and rubbed the soot from his old, red-rimmed eyes.

Jan spoke at last, still staring at the glowing embers, and here is what he said:

"The Lord is warning me. I never let myself be rescued and redeemed." An odd, queer light lurked deep within his eyes.

"I've been my own worst enemy," Jan told the night. Loose folds of worry pulled his face into a mask of helplessness as his life's work lay at his feet—a sorry heap of ashes. He turned and faced his wife. "What did I sow? What have I reaped? All is finished. Everything is gone."

She reached for him in an instinctive gesture. "Come on, Jan. Come with me. I'll make you a hot bowl of soup. I'll get you something decent for your stomach."

He brushed her hand away. He staggered slightly, and then he turned and fell.

She bent to him, astonished at seeing him fallen. "Jan, please. You don't feel well? What is it, Jan? Here. Take my arm."

His tongue was slurred: "It's all my fault. My fault. My fault."

She helped him to his feet. "You're not yourself. Tomorrow you'll feel better." She wrapped both arms around him. "Here is my shoulder. Hold on tight."

Jan struggled free of Josie. When he could stand again, he leaned, exhausted, against a blackened wall. "I sowed myself some dragon's teeth," he said, his voice a stranger's voice. "And this is the result."

"Here. Careful. Watch your step."

"I never gave due credit to the Lord."

"You're tired. In shock." She gently took his hand to soothe a bulging blister. "Don't we survive in good times and bad? We can rebuild. It's just a silly fire."

He said, a cruel edge to his voice: "You do not understand. A chicken's not a bird, and a woman is not an accountant."

"Jan?"

"You just don't understand. You never understood."

"Sit down here. Catch your breath. Take all the time you need. I'll stay with you. I'll wait."

"Wait? Wait for what?"

"For you to catch your senses."

"It is too late. Too late."

"What are you saying, Jan? We have more money in the bank than anyone I know. We have more land than anyone can use. We will rebuild. We'll work from a clean slate."

The fire had excited Josephine as though she had made love. Her words tumbled over each other. Here was a challenge; this was her fight; she would go as to war, with a heart that was shouting with joy at the challenge.

Jan stared at her. "It's too late." He took his watch, put it to his ear, and listened. "The time for that is past."

"There's always yet another season," said Josie helplessly. "I'll stand by you. We'll find a way tomorrow—"

"And who are you?" he asked, a total stranger now.

"Jan, what—"

"Without my hard-earned money, can you find your nose in the dark?"

Her hands flew to her lips. "You're not yourself." She struggled down her panic. "Here. Let me fasten that shoelace."

"First thing in the morning," Jan ordered her, in a voice she

didn't recognize, "you send for Dewey Epp. That's an order. Hear?"

"Whatever for? You aren't poor! Don't let yourself be panicked. There's always next year's crop."

"Do you know what the grasshoppers did last July? The soil is full of eggs."

"Your grain will sprout anew. Nobody I know grows such abundant crops—"

He shook his head. He looked as if he were drunk. "Shut up!" he said. "Shut up!" His back was curved against the wind, which kept on blowing and hooting, and as he struggled on and down the street and straight into the bed that Lizzy vacated in haste, his mother noticed, too: a phosphorescent light had settled in Jan's eyes.

The decades fell away from Lizzy. She dragged her quilts down from the attic. She packed Jan into pillows. She was beside herself.

"Here, take my apron, Josie. Don't dawdle. Hurry up. Don't stand there, staring out the window. There's dishes in the sink."

"A good, long weekend rest will do my husband good," said Josie to herself, and quietly did the dishes.

Monday sneaked by, and Jan was still in bed. He refused her the smallest of smiles.

The neighbors came to take a look and offer their assistance. They gathered slowly, one by one, and sat around the stove to speak with reverence of Lizzy's hospitality.

"This, too, will pass," said Josephine, and kneaded still more dough.

Tuesday arrived, and Jan's face was still ashen, his temperature high. When all her patience was exhaused, she said at last: "Jan, let me call a doctor."

His mother made short shrift of that. "A cup of chicken broth."

"I think Jan has suffered a stroke."

"Of course not," said Lizzy, and made sure that another rooster lost his head. A Sunday chicken, fried just so, would help her

son to rally; he was strong; he was an enterprising man. Charred lumber? Gutted harvests? He was a whiz at fixing things. Jan would replace the burned-down buildings, one by one. She had unending faith in him; there was nothing that Jan couldn't do. He knew precisely how to cope with manifold misfortunes—grasshoppers, jackrabbits, unseasonable rains that made the crop rot in the fields, stray cows, all that.

"Be sure you take your Ready Relief," she coached Jan every morning, her faith in Doctorjay intact.

Soon, Josie itched all over.

"Run, Josie. Hurry! Close the door. Don't let the dung flies in—"

"Come Jan. Let's take a walk. Just you and I. Here, take my arm. Let's get some sun. A brisk walk will do wonders—"

"Rest and warm milk," his mother ordered curtly.

"It's just the shock," said Josephine.

"A bag of sand right on his abdomen," said Doctorjay who visited periodically. Doctorjay never neglected a patient. His tonics still wrought the most marvelous cures. Each afternoon, come rain or shine, the bonesetter came chugging up the road in his beloved flivver to slap Jan on the shoulder, as in the olden days.

"Just keep your chin up! Hear? You're sicker than a dog. You're whiter than a sheet. Keep your old chin up, chap! It's not as if the walls of Jericho came down! Now, scat, all you females! Just leave him be and give him time to heal."

The moment he arrived, Old Lizzy glued herself to Doctorjay's squat heels. "Tell me the truth. Will he get better soon?"

"I have nothing but hope to report."

"Don't spare me, Doctorjay."

"Nothing but hope, Lizzy. Nothing but hope!"

To Josephine the healer said, when out of earshot of Jan's mother: "The good Lord only knows."

"Who's out there in the kitchen, Josie?" Jan asked, leaning

on one elbow.

This was one of her catty days. "Why? Can't you guess? Your mother. Your sister. And Lady Prayerful."

"What are they doing, kitten?"

"Having their morning kaffeeklatsch."

"Come sit here by my bed. Give me your pretty little hand."

He reached for her, but she withdrew. Her face was taut and hard. "You mark my word. They're going to stay til noon."

"Can you spare me ten minutes?"

"I'm busy. Can't you see?"

"I have to have a word with you."

"Not now." He tried to catch her eye, but she would not relent. He caught her by her fingers and pulled them to his chest. "Your hand, a small and dainty butterfly."

"Leave me alone."

"Don't. Josie, not like that! Don't be like that. They're merely catching up on what has happened with the neighbors. A lot has happened in the neighborhood since yesterday—"

"Those three," said Josie, choked, "are thicker than thieves. Thicker than thieves. That's all I have to say."

"So let them. That's their joy."

"They're plotting and scheming against me—" Her head ached, her ears were ringing, her appetite was gone. "They're cooking up stories about me. They are having a ball when they claim—"

"Look, are they hurting anybody? They're gossiping. That's all. Just let them be. Don't be uncharitable. Before noon, they will have tired each other—"

"But they're sitting in my kitchen. I'm trying to fix lunch."

"It's not your kitchen, Josie. It's my mother's."

"They nibble me to death. All morning long. Day after day. Walking down memory lane—"

"I know. I know. Just try to be more patient. We are my mother's guests. She can have all the guests she wishes. You won't get anywhere complaining."

"You're telling me?"

"You're very bright," he said. "But there are things you just don't understand. There's comfort in nostalgia. It feels good looking back."

She set her jaw. "To each his own."

He looked at her. "We've been married decades now. It's time we had a talk."

"I said not now."

"When, Josie? You're avoiding me. There's something of great urgency I must discuss with you—" He tried to sit. The room careened. Pain pounded in his temples.

But Josie's nerves were at the snapping point; she said, her own voice breaking: "I feel sick in the pit of my stomach."

"What is the matter with my little Josie—"

"If you must ask, you do not want to know. Let go of me."

"Now is as good a time as any. We must have a long talk. I never told you, Josie—"

But she was burning with resentment stored up by weeks of tedium. "You know what they argue about? Suspenders, a quarter. A Butterick pattern, a dime—"

"—I thought I was safe. I thought I could gamble a little. Beyond the boundaries of prudence—"

"Which mold to use for candles! The schoolmaster's cold! The needs of Miss-Goody-Two-Shoes's canary. The various cooking stages of a rooster. I am not kidding you!"

"Josie! Josie! Pay attention! I can't add up my losses any more—"

Her eyes snapped sharply into focus. "Jan, what in the world do you mean?"

"I took too many risks. I played the Hebrew game."

"Just what are you talking about?"

"I'm telling you: I'm finished!"

"As soon as the insurance agents are done with their assessment—"

"We have no policy. I never took it out."

"What? But why not?"

"I did not think I needed it. I knew that Dewey was against

it—"

"Why, Dewey, that dull maggot!"

"Shh! Don't! He was convinced that prayers were enough."

She stared at him. "You mean to say—"

Jan was perspiring heavily. He took a trembling breath. "—and now I don't even have the cash to pay a filing fee to start a farming bill of sale—"

A lifelong struggle fell away. The words came by themselves: "But you have me. I can learn how to balance the books."

She sat down by his bed. She put both arms around him. Inside her chest, a gale was tossing balls of fire. She felt as rich as though she had just visited a bakery where all was warm and clean. She said with a small laugh: "You mean to say your dollars are no longer magic?"

He listened to the beat of raindrops falling slowly on the roof. He smelled the strong odor of ashes.

"I played the market, Josie. Now I'm poorer than the poorest pauper. I lie in the dust before God."

She looked at him, her orphaned heart aglow, and knew: "This is the moment I've been waiting for. I've spent a lifetime waiting for this moment."

"You listen to me, Jan—" Joy leaped to the tip of her tongue and started coursing in a soft and molten current. She thought her heart would burst—that heart of hers, unclaimed and chaste despite so many years, now swept by a torrent of feelings.

"Jan? Are you serious? There's nothing left to hold us here? So let us leave. Let us start over. Just you and I and Rarey. We aren't poor! We can't be poor! For see? We have each other. How can two people such as you and I and our little son be poor?
"

"You just don't understand. Right now, the Donoghues have more cash than I do."

"So what? Let's leave. The three of us. Go somewhere else! Let's go to California. I've learned to type. I'll help." She felt drunk with the prospect of freedom. She had never felt richer than now. "Why, Jan! You are talking to me! You are finally

talking to me! We'll manage. We'll make do! Why, it was just a little fire, Jan, and maybe a small stroke. That's all. A puny little fire. A silly little stroke. First thing in the morning, I'll get us a map. I'll study opportunities for us in California!"

That night, she cried from happiness until sleep stole her senses.

The snow shrunk to clumps. The clumps finished melting. And Jan still lay in bed or else sat by the window.

He sat there, staring at the rain, without a word, for hours. When he tried standing, he groped at the wall for support. The minutes passed so slowly it seemed to Josephine that time was standing still.

She met the healer's eyes: "It's getting worse?"

Doctorjay blew his nose. "You want the truth? Here is the truth. Jan looks exactly like the broken bones of Christ. What worries me is not so much his body as his mind. His mind is like a glass of beer without the extra sparkle."

The summer came and went. The weather turned wet and then cold.

Still, Josie clung to hope. Jan would see things her way.

Soon, she was clinging to that hope as though it were a life raft.

She discussed all her plans for leaving with young Rarey. They talked when all the lights were out. Instead of sleeping soundly through the night to help a young boy's bones solidify, he and his mother talked.

The world smelled of decay.

The weeks turned into months.

The months became a year. Josie's hope ran through her fingers like water.

"As soon as Jan has licked his cold," said Josie to a friend in Wichita she visited as soon as she could free herself from bedside duties, "we'll call the masons and the carpenters."

"Sure. Sure. I know a Hebrew I can recommend. He'll cut you a fine loan."

She did not mention California. "I thought we might enlarge the house and add on a study for Rarey." Her bedside duties strained her more than she admitted even to herself, for Jan continued to be querulous. He was no easy patient: he wanted this, he wanted that, he kept on pushing her around until she felt like screeching.

"I need to feel useful," he said to her just yesterday, in an accusing tone of voice, as though his being helpless was now her fault as well.

So let him be useful, Josie thought, in any matter fit.

Details. Improvements. Sturdier doors. More modern windows, with good, strong hinges in the middle. Three stories high. Plus attic.

"Jan has huge plans. He will fit window frames into the structure," she told her friend, who still looked skeptical. "He'll hoist a brand new roof."

"What's wrong with him, do you suppose?"

"Nobody knows."

"What do you think?"

"This never-ending bedrest makes him sick," said Josephine, now drumming with her knuckles. "His mother hovers over him. He needs to get up. Move around. Get the blood circulating in his toes. His limbs are numb. His—" She checked herself. "Don't tell a soul. That man lost more than just his eyebrows and his lashes—"

Her friend raised both her eyebrows: "No! Really? You don't say!'

"Yes. Not that it matters now."

Sarcastically: "You are a lucky woman."

"Yes. Yes, I am."

Of course she was. She couldn't wait to see Jan leave that bed, start puttering about, get out from under Lizzy.

"He always spent too much on me—" she said to all her friends, as in the good old days, and hoped they'd cluck their tongues. She also said that to her enemies, of whom she had as many.

Old Lizzy had her firstborn in her pocket. She turned her kitchen drawers inside out for special healing recipes. Her eyes were dim, electricity dear, but she kept looking. Looking. Maybe if luck was on her side, she'd find that document the Donoghues still fussed about; that would cheer Jan; she knew it would cheer him a lot. She could have thrown a switch, but she did not: she lit her oil lamps everywhere.

"A penny saved, a penny earned," said Lizzy.

Jan did not contradict her. He smiled a shaky smile and stroked his stubble chin. He looked as though he meant to cross a river but didn't know where to begin to wade.

Little Melly came visiting daily. She came in through the back door, not bothering to knock. She brought a spoon, a towel, several extra pairs of socks, as well as a half-finished puzzle depicting her idols overseas: Their Royal Highnesses, the Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret.

"Here, Jan," she coaxed coyly, settling herself by the window. "I started it. You finish it. Forget the fire. Divert your mind with cheerful thoughts. Let's see what you can do—"

Jan, having fought a rasping cough all night, smiled wanly at the spinster. "I owe you, Little Melly. Had you not been so adamant for us to buy the fire trucks, the arson would have been much worse—"

He settled down to fit the pieces of the puzzle depicting England's future queen. The spinster flushed with victory.

Soon, Little Melly came and went three or four times a day—a wide, devoted shadow. She helped Jan start a scrapbook depicting details of the devastating night. She came barefoot, her shoes in her hand. She brought a brand new puzzle every week to help Jan pass the time. Jan's mind did not recoil when touching hers. She sidled up to him and stayed.

The rains skipped Kansas in the year that followed next. The sun baked the earth to a crisp. The harvest was iffy at best.

Then came winter. The farmers pulled down the ear flaps

and turned their collars up. Now, March. Next, April. Through Lizzy's open window panes wafted balmy May. Jan missed the second season's start and did not even notice. He swallowed his syrup and peppermint drops. He couldn't tell between present and past, but he could easily define the difference between Baptist and Methodist and point out with examples that both of them were devious and, therefore, dangerous.

All that was thanks to Dewey. The Holy Spirit was as nourishing as mother's milk, Jan had since learned from Dewey. The preacher bled Jan's pride with exhortation after exhortation from the Bible to make sufficient room for Faith. "A life without our Savior Christ," exhorted Dewey skillfully, "is like a supper without salt—"

Every Sunday after church, Dewey came churning up the road, clad in his fraying Sunday tweeds, looking for a shady spot to park the yellow flivver and have a little chat, a little restoration prayer with Jan Neufeld.

"The herds are perplexed," read Dewey to Jan from the Bible. "Look Ye for His pasture—"

Jan listened carefully. He nodded heavily at every solemn word.

It took but little effort on the preacher's part to take possession of Jan's broken will. Jan needed Dewey Epp. The beauty of the psalms restored his mind to a precarious balance. Without his weekly share of Dewey's Daily Thoughts, he felt disoriented and afraid. He felt as though he'd been a tomcat that had its whiskers burned away.

Josie watched Rarey sitting by the window, idle and motionless, anemic and forlorn. She felt her heart contract.

She tried diverting tactics. "Just do your homework, darling."

His talent couldn't be ignited. She watched as Rarey scribbled something on a slate, but it was evident he couldn't concentrate. Unspoken words hung in the room like fog.

No sooner had he written down a sentence or a number, than he tried to rub it out. At last he spoke. "Mom, what's a stock

market crash?"

"A what? I haven't the faintest idea. If you don't know the definition of a word, you have to look it up."

"My dictionary burned up in the fire."

"I'll buy you a new one. As soon as we go home."

"You aren't going home," said Lizzy evenly, while sticking out her chin, as brown and brittle as an onion leaf. "Not while Jan is still sick."

"Your father's sick," admitted Josie, stroking Rarey's hair with trembling fingers. "We have to stay at Grandma's. For just a little while. I know it's crowded around here; you want your privacy. But just as soon as—"

Old Lizzy's chin grew even longer. "You're welcome to stay here, my darling little one. It makes your Daddy happy to have his Mom take care of him; it makes her happy, too."

"I know," said Rarey, squirming.

"Grandma loves to have you here. She loves to ladle soup into your poor sick Daddy until her spoon scrapes the bottom of the caldron. Go in and have a talk with Daddy—"

"Yes. do," said Josephine. "Go in and talk to Daddy. Tell him what's on your mind. Ask him when we are leaving, finally, for California—"

Outside, the asphalt shone with rain. A thin but penetrating wind began to whistle forcefully.

"Mom. What's the matter with my Dad?"

"It's nothing, Rarey. Really. He'll soon be well again. It won't be long." She tried to comfort him. "Listen. Just listen to that rain! Have you ever heard anything like it? And here it is not yet November."

Tears strangled Rarey's voice: "If he adds two plus two, he might get three. He might get five. Mom! What's the matter with my father?"

"It's just an old garden variety cold. I promise you. Before the year is out, we'll have our privacy. I promise you. You mark my word."

She knew it was a lie. Defeat lodged in Jan's spine.

# Chapter 69

Things were bad, and getting worse. First the stocks plunged, then the brokers, falling to their deaths from high-rise windows onto the sidewalks of New York. Banks slammed their doors and rammed them shut. Wall Street was in a panic.

Jan leafed through Rarey's dictionary. The flames had singed it at the edges, and many words were lost. Stock market crash? The dictionary didn't say. It was a brand new phrase, as yet to be defined. He started with the A's and ended with the Z's, and when he finished, he could not remember, precisely, what it was he sought to learn. All was a hazy blur.

Across the prairie, mill after mill began to shut down. Grass grew through cracks in the asphalt. Nobody knew how to climb out of the puzzling and painful Depression.

Business everywhere fell off, even on Broadway and Main, where the Jews sold their furs and their pearls.

Wages sank to unheard depths.

Taxes shot into the sky.

Another spring arrived. The weather stayed sullen. Jan's fields lay deep in brownish water. A late frost, coming from

nowhere, turned them to sheets of ice. That kept the winter wheat from breathing, and long before the preachers started sprucing up their sermons about the Lord's resolve to test the Faith of Mennotown, Jan knew that yet another harvest would be lost.

He tried to keep his mounting debts from Josie, although at every opportunity she tried to buttonhole him to get the latest figures. She prodded him and pushed him and would not give him peace: "Jan, something vexing on your mind?"

He longed to tell somebody: "My net is only half of what it was last year." Arms folded, however, he told her: "Stop digging, Josie. Do."

"Of course," said Josephine. "Sorry for troubling you. Why don't you take a hike?"

His flivver sat unused, just gathering bird droppings. It needed care; the clutch had been slipping; the radiator boiled; the engine sounded sluggish. But where to find the cash?

His farm equipment needed major overhaul—but where to get a loan?

"If you would let me help, I'd help," said Josie. "You know I've learned to type."

But Jan just shook his head. "Type what? Type invoices?" Nobody had the extra cash for binder twine, much less for sacks of seed.

"So suit yourself," said Josie sharply. "Don't say I didn't ask."

She closed the door so hard the handle came off in her hand.

Lizzy kept vinegar towels on Jan's burning head all through that saddening, worsening year—tiptoeing back and forth as quietly as she could, fussing and nursing as best she knew how in her old-fashioned, time-proven ways.

Another fence fell into ruin.

Where Lizzy used to keep her butter tubs, now spiders spun their webs.

Lizzy could not imagine her son might succumb. Just yesterday a man of awesome energy—a man who made square deals,

loved sports, did more than his share of charity work—and now he couldn't shake a cold?

She buttoned him up to his neck. Her heart just broke for him.

She laid down the law: "Seven glasses of milk. Every day!" To help him out, she stretched her household pennies. "Stop it now, Josephine. Why wash your hands three dozen times a day?"

An extra piece of soap was now a luxury few people could afford. But Josie wouldn't be appeased. "It's dusty around here. The dust is simply everywhere—"

"Then sweep again," said Lizzy, while trying out an awkward recipe that called for linseed oil instead of butter. "The broom sits in the corner."

Jan couldn't raise his spirits no matter how he tried. He lacked the strength to come to the simplest conclusions. Josie owed the grocer, the butcher. She put a cardboard insert in her shoe to reinforce the sole. She covered acorns with soft cloth, thus fashioning her buttons. She wore her dresses inside out—and every stitch she wore was made by hand from discards. She brushed her teeth with salt and bought the cheapest cuts of meat, but when it came to gifts for Rarey—brushes, paper, books, supplies—that's where she drew the line.

She still had her nose in her books. Before she even finished one, already she reached for another.

As far as Lizzy was concerned, a book was an aversion. "Some people always find the time to read, no matter what the time of day, no matter what the weather," said Lizzy, speaking sharply.

"If it upsets you, then don't read," snapped Josie, for her part.

"Looking for solutions between covers never got you anywhere," said Lizzy, sounding grim.

"That's your opinion. Merely your opinion." Josie, too, was growing grim, not only in her looks but in her attitude. Whereas in olden times, she gobbled anything that was in print, now her beloved penny dreadfuls left her cold; romantic books fell from

her listless hands. Her world was gray on gray.

Around Jan's favorite recalcitrant, Old Lizzy tried to hold her tongue. She knew that unpaid bills lay like huge boulders on Jan's chest. His debts were crushing him.

"You are my bedrock, son," she told him many times, to give him confidence. "There's nothing you can't do."

From the time that he was twelve years old, Lizzy had relied on Jan. She knew he would search long and hard to find a way to square his obligations.

Jan sold a choice stallion, which helped, but not for long. He rented the one piece of land still unencumbered, down by the sluggish river, not good for anything but grazing.

He counted on the money from the lease, but the Depression went from bad to worse; the neighbor who had meant to run his goats there, defaulted on the payment. Jan had to take it back.

"Try squaring a circle," said Josie.

"That, too," said Jan, starting to shake uncontrollably, "is easier said than done."

Jan shipped his last grain load to Wichita, only to learn that the price he obtained didn't cover the freight.

He stood, forlorn and shivering, watching the trains pass by. He saw that they were empty. He stood and watched down by the bend where, once upon a golden time, he and his giggling puppy love had put their pennies on the track and watched them being flattened. Now if a train arrived at all, it wobbled sluggishly, at half the speed, while he stood there and watched.

His heart was empty as a cave, for Josie wouldn't smile at him; she refused him the tiniest smiles. It was as if all feelings had come to a standstill, along with the mills and the trains.

Another fence tipped sideways.

His daughters' children brought their fishing rods to be repaired and to make Jan feel useful. He looked down at his strangely paralyzed hands.

Months passed; Jan didn't get better. He seldom went upstairs, where Josie pounded on her typewriter and Rarey kept his

brushes.

It was warm in Lizzy's kitchen; why go upstairs where it was drafty from a broken window? He meant to fix that window, as soon as he could spare the cash.

He helped his mother do the dishes and puttered in the pantry, doing this and doing that, until Lizzy, with a pained expression, told him: "Forgive me, son, but I grow weary of the tension. Don't do that, please. It makes me itch all over."

Jan's eyes no longer held her glance. "What do you mean? Do what?"

"Re-stack my pots and pans."

"I didn't know I did."

"You did."

"I'm sorry, Mom. I'm sorry."

"All right! All right!"

"Mom—"

"Go take in a talkie," said Lizzy. "Take Rarey, and go watch a flicker."

"The newsreels make me dizzy."

"Here. Take your coat. The talkie starts at two."

Jan went, for there was nothing else to do. He sat, forlorn and stony, and listened as the audience whistled at the mustached man from Austria who tossed his forelock from his eyes. The screen was draped with swastikas. The flags snapped in the breeze; the streets were black with throngs. The German air ships swooped and dove. The Führer raised his hand in a salute, and people pulled their caps. He sent a wave of fury through the audience and caused enormous traffic jams. His voice reverberated through the speakers strung out across the trees. He shouted into several microphones at once.

He pointed a stiff finger and shouted that he would shine the light of certitude on Germany; he would expose the traitors and connivers.

To forestall bankruptcy, Jan put three of his last remaining parcels up for sale—land he had set aside to deed to Rarey as

soon as he would want a homestead of his own.

That measure wrung his heart. He kept wiping the sweat from his arms, face, and neck—but this was an emergency; he had no other choice.

He offered it to several Jews with whom he'd traded in the past. He still had patriotic feelings; the shame of going to the Jews with hat in hand was almost more than he could bear, but after having brought himself to go that far, against every instinct in his bone, Jan realized with shame and bitterness: the Hebrews walked away.

There was now a growing and festering mood: people blamed them for the Depression. The widespread argument now ran: You couldn't ever trust a Jew to help you in a pinch. They sold you two left shoes and claimed that was the latest fashion. Some people called that chutzpah.

The Hebrews in the universities still spoke of betterment for all humanity; their claim was they pitied the dull, the obscure, and the poor, but they destroyed the middle class, as far as Jan could tell. To wit: they huddled over secret anagrams, and what that meant was anybody's guess.

Jan visited with three neighbors at the garden fence, who voiced the same concerns.

"Go look for Josie's Finkelsteins," one said, not even hiding malice. "Only the Levis have money left over."

Jan wished himself a hundred miles away, but duty was duty; it had to be done. There was no other choice. He started looking for a usurer to underwrite a loan—and look he did, all afternoon. In vain.

The only thing he found was dust and wind that swept in gusts through all the dirty streets of Wichita. The windows of the Levi stores were empty, with spider webs collecting in the corners, "For Sale" signs plastered on the walls. Jan felt, as he walked down the empty streets, that his heart's blood was leaking from his boots.

He tried to share that odd sensation when he came home at

dusk. He told his wife: "I was panhandled by a friend."

"Who?"

"Who? Never mind. No need to spread his shame."

"What happened?"

"He asked me for a loan to fill his flivver tank. I didn't have a dollar left to spare."

She stared at him with hungry eyes. She knew this rankled most—that helping others was no longer possible.

"I used to think that, in America, if you worked hard, plenty would be your reward." His hands lay inert in his lap. "I used to lavish help on neighbors wherever I saw them in need—"

"Of course you did," said Lizzy from the window. "You will again. You'll pull out soon. Your neighbors count on you to help them in a pinch."

Jan let himself be packed into his mother's quilts, but not before he said: "Blow out the light now, Josie. We have to save on fuel. Come. Let me hold you, kitten."

"Not now."

He pulled his knees up to his chin so terror could not leap upon him like a leopard.

Most citizens of Kansas, by that time, saw eye to eye with Henry Ford, and Jan did, too, now that his world was upside down: Ford's bogeymen had crooked noses, greedy eyes.

Not even Lizzy voiced objections when this was mentioned openly, right in her well-scrubbed kitchen. "Where there's smoke, there must be fire," said Lizzy, and knew that all agreed. "You draw the line somewhere."

She added that she was no "bigotist". She was fond of that word.

"No racist feelings here," said Lizzy. "But on the other hand, it makes you wonder, doesn't it?" She watched the bobbing heads.

She had adapted to okays, to electricity and telephones, but she had never even once conversed at leisure with a Hebrew. She kept a discreet distance. She did not even shop at five-and-tens, unless it was for Rarey.

She could not help but see what everybody saw: the Jews had lots of cash, no matter what the season.

But sharing, no. Not they.

Their furtive glances never rested anywhere. It was as Dewey said: they had a murky history. They hankered for the Holy Land and dreamed of taking over Palestine. That was their secret wish.

"They are the Devil's tools," Dewey had preached just the previous week. Without mincing his words, he announced that the Antichrist had already been born, intent on devouring the world. It was merely a matter of time, claimed Dewey, until the devil carried out his threat and started gobbling up the globe. "Just go and take a look at Wichita," said Dewey, "and draw your own conclusions."

The begging bowl was now a common sight.

Stale bread sold for a nickel, but no one had the cash.

Before another year was gone, established merchants, one by one, succumbed like swatted flies. Many homeless people slept in doorways and on the benches in the park. Hundreds prowled the alleys in their matted coats and muddied boots, grubbing through mountains of garbage for morsels of discarded food.

Along the railroad tracks on Twenty-First and Broadway, gray transients huddled in shacks they had constructed of cardboard, fruit crates, and blankets. Many slept in packing crates, and some in empty barrels. Hobos stood elbow to elbow, their backs hunched to the wind, in line for a warm bowl of soup.

"Fine soil for the Gospel," said Dewey. He knew from past experience that nothing helped a good awakening to Christ like a hot bowl of onion soup. He resolved to cut in on the action. The papers called it "Dewey's Dole", and it became the model for the state. Overnight, charity had grown into a thriving business, a mighty and controlling industry. Whoever wasn't scared of paperwork became a civil servant, and that's what Dewey did.

Soon, Dewey's food bank ran full steam, and people came from everywhere to let themselves be fed while being rescued and redeemed to turn a brand new leaf.

Twelve relatives poured from a van that broke down right in front of Lizzy's home. The wind, they claimed, had blown them out of Oklahoma.

These were times to band together. Old Lizzy shelved her goiter problems: family was family.

"Let's double up! Let's double up! Here. Try my pumpkin pie!"

It was no longer ham and eggs, rather turnips, onions, parsnips, and carrots. Old Lizzy didn't mind. She loved good company; it helped her pass the time. This was her home; a guest was always welcome. Times would get better, surely.

"Stay for a week," she said at first, and Josie fluffed the pillows. And why not, meanwhile, settle down for an extended chat and do the best you could?

Her Oklahoma cousins, thrice removed, were glad to thread her needles. They made a bit more work for Jospehine, what with the extra toweling, but then, work never hurt a body.

A month went by, and Lizzy said: "Why, stay another month, what is another month?" And, soon, she said: "Just stay until the rains return. Don't even mention leaving."

From morning till the sun went down, the relatives sat placidly in Lizzy's crowded kitchen, and talked about the good old days, when life was spare but good.

"It's not just a matter of doing, but doing without," they loyally bolstered each other. Assorted neighbors would join in, agreeing, for nothing could shake their convictions: the good days would be back. The past was dim, the present troublesome, the future a huge question mark. You clung to memories.

Old Lizzy was content. She was preparing for the grave and made no secret of the fact, but in the meantime, here was her family—she still right in the middle! What more could she have asked?

Many of the little baby boys and girls she had helped to life with Doctorjay's assistance long ago were parents and grandparents now. She knew them, one by one—knew all their quirks

and oddities and weaknesses and foibles. She shone with happiness when yet more company arrived.

Her feet turned cold while sitting; her breath, at times, grew short—what with the dusty winds that blew and blew and would not be appeased. The doctors Josie called on her behalf, despite Jan's worried frowns—for every penny had to stretch!—looked somber and scribbled prescriptions.

They said to her: "More vegetables. Less *Griebenschmalz*," but when they left, she scoffed at every word. When Josie wasn't looking, she threw the fancy medicine into the sink and relied on the powers of prayer and camomile tea.

"What if those pills snuff out my mind?" she argued to herself.

She was content to dabble with the trusted remedies that Doctorjay left on her sill, next to her red geraniums. Her mind was still magnificent, her memories intact. Years vanished, but memories stayed.

Remember how we swapped those roosters to improve the size and color of our eggs? Remember the Electric Nineties? Remember how we were afraid at first to throw that switch? And slept with light all night?

Upstairs sat Josephine, still pounding on her typewriter, which made Jan's headaches soar. When she said "California," he thought his head would split.

Jan could not put his land into a suitcase and take it somewhere else. While his family slept, Jan kept on pacing. Pacing. His mood was black and heavy. His earth still lay untilled; he hungered for the soil, enough to drive him mad. He longed for the potato blossoms Rarey loved to paint—first white, then blue, then pink!—but even if he planted his potatoes, which was a monumental chore, then who would dig them out?

Jan had no money left. He couldn't hire help. Cash was in short supply. Five years ago, he had employed a hundred field hands easily and sent the overflow to help his daughters' husbands. Now he could barely pay for axle grease—a quarter for a pound.

The family watched silently as Jan scanned the "Help Wanted" ads.

He sat by the window, hunched over the *Wichita Eagle.* Each morning, he studied the fine print, line upon line and letter by letter, still hoping against hope to find a place in the economy where he could use his skills for other people's betterment and still keep an eye on the soil.

He even hitched three rides to Wichita, because fuel was dear now and hard to obtain. Broken and bleeding, that's how he came back.

He had a laugh that Josie did not recognize. He sat there, shivering, with bluish lips. But still, he kept on laughing. He laughed and couldn't stop.

She said without turning around: "What happened to your coat?"

"I gave it away. I gave it to a homeless man. He was about my size—"

She kept tapping her foot with impatience. No stranger to mood swings was Josie. "What do you mean, you gave it away? That was your finest garment. It cost you an arm and a leg."

"He was a wheezing windbag. He said he had no address—"

"You gave away your coat? So a stranger could walk around beaming?"

"You just don't understand. You don't. You do not understand."

She shrugged and said no more. The country shivered in the grip of something vile and menacing and ominous that no one understood.

# Chapter 70

Natasha learned from Dominik, when he returned to Apanlee, his chest ablaze with decorations, that Comrade Stalin would bring lasting peace, prosperity and progress.

"And to that end," declared her son, "I am in charge of Apanlee. Does anyone object?" He gave the twins such an eyeful of hatred that they stepped aside without words.

Natasha's jaws snapped open. Her eyes grew round with alarm.

"All this to satisfy a grudge?" Natasha asked, but only of herself. Aloud she said, drying her hands on her apron: "What is the meaning of all this? Answer your mother now!"

"Use your imagination."

Her eyelids started quivering, for what she saw could not be put in words. She followed him, determined, as he strode whistling through the halls of Apanlee and knuckled the ancestral portraits: *"Donnerwetter! Donnerwetter!"*

The Pioneer took Marleen's elbow gently. "Come, Mother. Please. There is no point in standing in his way."

"There isn't," Dominik affirmed, and winked at Mimi, ven-

turesome, while sprawling in the kitchen. "Here, feel my shirt. Feel the magnificent material."

He helped himself to several young potatoes still steaming on the table while grinning at the Pioneer. He liked her from the start, deciding on the spot how to make use of her.

That's how Natasha's son returned—in charge of the Apanlee harvests.

He hung his sheepskin on a nail and leaned his rifle in a corner. He dropped his backpack in the middle of the floor and said what he had come to say.

"We will remake the universe. Out with the old. In with the new. It's now the New World Order."

"I know you," said Marleen, still standing in the door. "I've known you all my life. There's nothing I don't know."

"There's nowhere you can hide," he said to her, in turn. "It's better that you understand that."

She did not drop her gaze. She quietly said: "I do."

He had practiced his menacing stare. Malevolence belched out of him like lava. He left no opportunity alone. "Just you remember that."

"I will."

"Good, then. To start, why don't we call a village Soviet meeting? We might as well start now."

The transfer of the land from private ownership to Comrade Stalin's custody turned out to be a brisk, efficient fifteen-minute matter. The village Soviet witnessed it. The fog rose from the soil. The afternoon turned black.

"We have no interest whatsoever in compromise," said Dominik. He lavished praise on every aspect of the Revolution. He declared that his task was to double the Apanlee harvests.

He told the crowd that had grown thick outside: "We all know beggars can't be choosers. I hope that you agree."

By then, there was hardly a struggle.

"We might as well shake hands," said Dominik. "I need you, and you need me. Let's start over with a clean slate. Why don't

we let bygones be bygones?"

It gave him pleasure to observe the twins were burning with affront. "Right here," he told the village Soviet, and watched him dip his pen in Uncle Benny's marble ink pot. "Right on the dotted line."

"That's right. Right here," replied the village toady, blotting the paper, letting the pen wiper slide into his pocket after tugging briefly at his beard.

"That's done," cried an elated Dominik. "My, how the world will change! How we'll be engineering global human betterment!"

"Here's to our brand new, scientific, pig-producing program," declared a sodden Dominik while climbing on a chair. He looked as though he were running a fever. "The past is the past, and forgotten already. So let's drink to the future. Why not? I need you to be on my side." "Bottoms up! Bottoms up!" his drunken cronies howled.

"The future has arrived."

"We'll make traitors walk barefoot to Moscow!"

When the cheering died down, he had this to say to the twins: "I have good news for you. You will be in charge of the pig-tending brigade—" His gaze slid slowly to Larissa's neck. It lingered there as though to say: "Soon, we will have a feast."

He preened himself in front of every mirror. He told Marleen at every opportunity: "I take my orders from the Kremlin. Knock that into your German head." He also said: "For every sow, a separate stall. For every boar, a bucket full of barley."

Marleen wore a look as though stunned by a blow of such force that it numbed all her nerve ends at once. But she kept to herself; she backed into a silence as thick as fog.

She knew that Dominik would heed no clock, no calendar.

A sort of twilight settled on her face and stayed there, hiding her. She was the kind who listened to her thoughts.

She never argued back. Her nerves were taut with rage. Let not the right hand know about the left!—that was her motto now.

He gave her a wink and a slap on the back. A bean stuck to

his chin.

She saw no need to be obedient to his whims. She knew that shouting would not till the fields, and cursing would not milk the cows or carry fodder to the horses.

But Dominik puffed out his chest and laughed right in her face. There was no dimple on his chin, but he was in fine fettle. He said it first to her and later to the neighbors: "You'll thank me soon enough." And then he added slyly: "Don't say you weren't warned," still laughing to himself.

"Double lightning! Double lightning," prophesied Natasha darkly, but Dominik picked up his mother jauntily and hoisted her into the air.

Natasha was the only one at Apanlee who showed no fear of Dominik. At every opportunity, Natasha told her son: "I want no part of this."

She found a pillow for his stomach, for soon she realized his mounting quota worries gave him a lot of gas. She mediated, meanwhile. She did the best she could.

She had a hidden ledge on which two icons stood—one for her son, one for the twins; she prayed for all of them. Natasha had broad shoulders for the yoke on which she dangled her two buckets. She balanced them precariously. She stepped in front of Dominik while Apanlee was sighing in the wind. She warned him he was pressing his luck.

"Get out of the draft while you can. There's work to be done in the fields. This won't be like handing out pamphlets."

He rolled himself a cigarette. He had a ready answer. "Whatever needs to happen will be done. It's for our Motherland."

Natasha kept a civil tongue while talking to Marleen. She explained that her son was a man of importance, an official of weight at the Party.

"All else might fail," she told Marleen. "I'm still his mother. See? He'll listen to his mother."

As days grew into weeks, she told Marleen repeatedly: "Just keep out of his way. I know how to sweeten his temper."

She kept her eye on Dominik, as she had always done. The Kremlin? Moscow? Comrade Stalin? She picked no useless argument.

"Don't spit into a well," she said to him, relying on time-tested proverbs. "The day will come when you will have to drink from it—"

"There's freedom now. I can do anything I please."

"Don't push your luck. The Germans know the secrets you'll soon be needing, son—"

"They will do anything I say."

"Don't count on it."

"The Revolution evened up a score. And not a day too soon."

She was carefully picking her way. She would not let herself be cowed by Party schemes and rules. "Sure. Sure. As soon as every rooster learns to whistle," Natasha said, and thus had the last word.

Freedom was now at hand, Natasha knew, which was just wonderful—so much of it, in fact, there was overflow.

It meant that she could speak her mind at every opportunity. It meant that she could do that now. Therefore, she said to Dominik: "Don't let their faces fool you. Make sure your luck holds out."

She gave him many handy pointers. She was his mother. That sufficed.

"Don't lose your head," she scolded Dominik, but he was on a roll, and nothing stopped him now.

She lingered by the stove. "Now listen to your mother, fool! You cannot fix a broken egg—"

"Perhaps not. But I can slurp the evidence—"

"And give yourself a case of indigestion—"

"I am in perfect standing with the Party. I am a dedicated patriot. That's all they need to know."

While frightened neighbors groveled at his feet, Natasha brandished her big broom, and chased him from corner to corner.

Shortly thereafter, a truck full of government workers arrived from Berdyansk. The first to jump down from the wagon was Shura, as vulgar as a whistle.

Shura carried papers verifying that she was a trusted and respected proletarian. Her voice was rough and thick. Her hair looked like a beehive.

"You, there!" she squealed, while fastening a mean eye on Marleen. "Don't stand there, gawking wastefully. You will report to me. I am the new fowl brigadier. I'll be in charge of doubling egg production." She had a cold and used her sleeve. She had watery eyelids and a coarse tongue, but she was charged with an amazing energy. "Come here! Hold out your hand so I can ink it with a number."

Natasha could tell that this woman lacked breeding. She remembered her finest society manners.

"Who's she? No doubt she grew up among quarrels and blows," she said to Dominik. She took the harlot firmly by the elbow and announced. "You can sleep in the straw in the stable."

"She's having my child," said Dominik slowly. "It will sleep in the cradle that was denied me. It's she and I, from now on, who'll fill the nursery."

Shura proudly wore the blood-red ribbon she had earned for her political activities, having been a noted agitator in the days of Civil War. She never missed a May Day procession.

She told Natasha soon thereafter that she had lost three brothers to the proletarian struggle. She spoke of her three martyred siblings in a vague but patriotic way.

She said she lived to honor them. They gave her rights nobody else possessed. She kept rubbing her knuckles with spittle.

"They sacrificed. We follow in their footsteps. They did not die in vain."

Natasha answered carefully. "The quota laws are strict."

"For every drop of blood, a sea of blood. Such is the balance sheet."

Natasha paused at length before she asked: "So? What is

your conclusion?"

After thinking for several minutes, Shura threw out her chest and, flicking at a dead fly that had fallen from the sill, proclaimed: "Here's what I think: if you work in the barn, you better get used to the smell."

Natasha had a ready proverb of her own: "Every day holds a sunrise and a sunset."

"Hah! Wait and see!"

Natasha kept on peeling her potatoes. "I must be dense. What are you saying, Citizen? What are you telling me?"

"See this?" Shura paused, then pulled a notebook from the shelf. "This is a list of do's and don'ts. It settles every argument."

"Dethroned but not defeated," is what Natasha said.

The steps of Apanlee were jammed with people, and more came streaming down the goose path to learn the New World Order rules from Dominik who strove for an appeasing mood. Natasha ran for chairs.

"Come here. Sit down beside me," he offered, belching loudly.

"We will get by with what we grow," the Germans said in turn.

"Look. What's the point of arguing? We have a Five-Year Plan. I need you, and you need me. I'm giving you plenty of warning. You will work for the state if you wish to continue to eat."

Night after night, he surrounded himself with his cronies, who were a noisy lot. They drank boisterous toasts to the Red Revolution, to the Hammer and Sickle, to Lenin, to Stalin. "To friendship among all the nations," they shouted. "To the World Revolution!" they roared. "Bottoms up! Hey? Bottoms up!"

They drank to the country they would reconstruct, now sunk in a sea of red banners.

"To the future! The future!" they sang.

"We'll be revamping everything."

"We'll put our most productive workers in the paper."

Said Dominik, at intervals, still hectoring the Germans: "We'll make a showcase out of Apanlee. If you cooperate, you'll have no problems whatsoever. If, on the other hand—"

In days to come, his smile was slanting more and more. He modified his boasts.

"Look, let's be friends instead of enemies. I'm just a little peg in a vast scheme. It isn't me you have to fear. Who knows who'll soon be feasting on your marrow?"

He did not notice that the planting season slipped away. His cronies stayed and stayed. Night after night, they drank until they grew weary.

They cheered the city labor squads expected in a convoy who were mysteriously delayed. They drank toasts to the milking brigades about to be scheduled; they toasted the vegetable crews about to be formed. Toasting Yuri and Sascha who stood, silent statues, and watched it all happen, they drank hearty toasts to a four-season grain.

"Bottoms up! *Nu?* Bottoms up!" roared an inebriated Dominik. "The night is still young. Who's talking about going home? I will not hear of leaving."

"We'll make a happy world for all," insisted Shura, too, who had not yet improved her manners. She talked with a mouth full of food. "We are all equal now. Dead are all class distinctions."

Shura made a racket when she ate. She told Natasha many bloody stories. Some uncouth joke was always tickling her.

One morning, she sat there in the sunshine, giggling to herself. She seemed unable to control her mirth. "Some people may not like our ways, but then, so what? So what?"

Her life and times had made a stoic of Natasha. "You're right. So what? Good question, Shura. Excellent."

Shura spit through a gap in her teeth.

"Don't make me furious. I know you take their sides. Who knows them better than you do?"

"That's right. I do. Just you remember that."

"I freely criticize myself for being much too lenient," claimed Shura soon thereafter, and laughed until her belly ached. "Catch me their biggest, fattest rooster."

"No rooster, Citizen."

She started shouting lustily: "Tomorrow, Dominik will be expecting guests. They are important Party comrades. I need that rooster to impress them. I want that rooster! Now!"

Natasha squared her jaw and said: "Shout all you want, but shout at me; there is no point in shouting at Marleen; she does not have a rooster."

"I'll squash her like a louse," yelled Shura. "I'll hang her from the ceiling by her heels."

"Look at the smoke that rises from her chimney," Natasha pointed out. "It doesn't even curl."

"I need that rooster, and that's it."

"You better listen. Citizen! You listen to this toothless peasant. Marleen is proud, but she is no one's fool. Where would she hide a rooster? A rooster makes a ruckus. She can't afford to draw attention to herself."

"A pampered settler sitting on the country's richest soil, and does not have a rooster?"

"No rooster," lied Natasha, while thinking of the laying hen she had helped hide, still worth at least ten eggs.

"I have it from reliable informants that there exists an extra bird at Apanlee. I know that for a fact. What will the Party think? Where is she hiding it?"

Natasha started wheedling. "Can every rumor safely be believed?"

"No rooster?"

"Well, a hen. All feathers, skin and bones."

"Ha!" Shura cried triumphantly. "The truth prevails. We must investigate at once."

"It's just a skinny hen, too skinny for the pot!"

"Be sure to tell Marleen to have it plucked for me," yelled Shura, in the know.

There was no end to it.

# Chapter 71

Marleen stood upon the blood-soaked earth of Apanlee and watched what happened next. The government told Dominik how many pounds of cheese and butter to deliver, but did it tell the cows?

His first totals fell short of the quota.

Her glance turned into beams of steel when Dominik tried covering his bafflement while boasting broadly to his cronies: "It may be difficult at first, but all we need is time. The future will bring peace, prosperity and progress—"

She told him evenly: "That's what we hope for, Citizen. That is our fervent hope."

"What? Are you mocking me?"

"We have no disagreement, Dominik. All of us hope fervently for lasting peace, prosperity and progress."

The grain procurement plan that Dominik had slovenly drawn up did not impress the twins, although what came out of their mouths was not the language written in their eyes.

"When it comes to the future, Dominik," they said to him,

sarcastically, "nobody has your ingenuity."

Admitting that he needed them to help him with his quota lists was anguish magnified. "They'll make any confession I please to dictate," he boasted to his mother. "We have the means to make a deaf-mute speak. They'd better understand that."

"Yes. I suppose so. I suppose so. The moment when that rooster learns to whistle you slaughtered just last week."

"I know they will."

"If you say so."

"I do."

"And who made sure your limbs grew straight? You fool! *Durak! Durak!* Why don't you listen to your mother?" Natasha spread her huge, rough hands. Natasha was ashamed. In fact, her shame was grim. Her memory was not yet dim. She dove to the root of the matter.

"What have they ever done to you?" she asked with genuine astonishment. "Why do you hate them so? If you would only treat them properly—"

"You ask?"

"I do. When I was young, I might have made mistakes. The fault was mine. I made mistakes. Why punish them, instead?"

"So? Let us profit by mistakes," said Dominik, and winked. He sprawled in the family tub. "They're imperialist spies. I know they are plotting and scheming."

Natasha warmed his towels by the fire. "Remember: they know how to rescue your harvest."

He soaped himself from head to toe. "We'll teach them a lesson. It's time they learned a lesson they are not likely to forget."

She watched him, thinking canny thoughts. Her son was her son; he was without conscience, but he was still her son. That was the bottom line. Natasha liked to keep her irons in the fire. She understood self-interest. It never hurt to pour cold water over sizzling coals. Therefore, she said to Dominik: "I'm glad you are making a name for yourself. Still, do you need to shout so? They're human beings. They have pride."

He laughed so hard he almost strangled on his words. "How often do I have to tell you? A cat dislikes a dog."

She heard that laugh and ran to tell the twins: "Be careful what you say. He knows how to wring a confession."

This was but a family quarrel. If she took sides, it would make things much worse. She clung to all of them with a defiant loyalty. They were the only family she had.

Soon it was clear to everyone: The unifying element at Apanlee was Baba.

"Let's say that you've been cautioned," growled Dominik, after he had assembled the entire neighborhood to give them a fine scolding. "This is a state farm now. The rules have changed. You hear?" He now unrolled a scroll that looked like a map of the village. His eyebrows grew bushier and bushier.

"Splinters must fly," he let it be known, "when trees are chopped down. We're chopping down trees. We're chopping down forests, in fact."

He knew they were blinded by hate. The frown on his forehead was etched. He recognized defiance. He would make sure that it didn't spell defeat. He stopped them in the middle of their proverbs. "Don't claim you weren't warned."

They merely stood there, shuffling.

"Heroic workers," he announced, "are going to receive appropriate rewards. Defeatists, saboteurs, and shirkers, on the other hand, will have a choice: Siberia or heaven."

He smacked his lips and closed his eyes. A strong wind came from nowhere and whirled the leaves about. A cat shot up an apple tree, its fur on end with terror.

Marleen said to Natasha: "My sons, whose hearts are brimming with the Holy Spirit, are shadowed at each step."

Natasha had no ready answer. She, too, would listen to the tread of terror on the cobblestones of Apanlee, and knew that when they came and took this one, that one—good neighbors, every one!—a hush fell after they left.

Thus disappeared a widow's only son. This happened the following spring.

Louise, whose maiden name was Hansen, was distantly related to Marleen. Somewhere in bygone years two cousins had married and had fused the clans of the Hansens, the Penners, the Harms, and the Dycks. In better days, their offspring had been numerous as beetles in the spring, but then the Revolution came and put an end to progeny—all poor Louise had left was just one timid son. He was a meek and waxen fellow, but still the apple of her eye. She loved him more than life. She surveyed every girl she knew and pushed them in his path.

The Soviet agents came for him. They pulled him from deep sleep. They walked him silently behind the lilac bush Louise's grandmother had planted lovingly when she first came to the Ukraine from Northern Germany.

They said to him while he still rubbed the night out of his eyes:

"Confess you are a saboteur and traitor."

He reached back, grasping at a branch. It was a lilac twig, rich with the sap of May. The branch snapped in his hand. That was the only sound before the bullet flew. That's where he fell, another nameless victim, and did not rise again.

"*Tovarich*," said Natasha to her son, to let him know she understood the rules. "This letter came this morning—"

Dominik took it from her and straightened all the creases. He said without looking at her: "How am I supposed to triple the crop? How? How? Will someone tell me how?"

Natasha watched him stealthily. She stuck with her instincts; she had rehearsed them well. She saw the glint of fear in Dominik, though he was now a man who carried great weight in the Party.

She cuffed him playfully and grinned from ear to ear. "I don't know why, but the twins come to mind. They have a sure touch with the kernels."

From his desk, he picked up a thick sheaf of papers. He spoke to the wall and the ceiling.

"They want their travel papers, do they not? They want to leave the country?"

She raised her chin, alert. "A travel paper is more precious than a nugget."

He started chewing on a hangnail. "That's good to know. That's excellent to know."

She jumped with both arthritic feet into the middle of his thoughts. "That might be just the lever that you need. It's whom you know that counts. You have a lot of friends. In highest Party quarters. You're brilliant, Dominik. What's more, you are in charge. You don't need a production gap. They need to sleep at night and not lie staring at the ceiling."

"Go on."

"If they believe that they can get their travel papers through your friends in highest quarters, they'll help you with the crops."

"You think they will?"

"I know they will. Just leave things to your mother."

"You're sure?"

"I'll put in a good word for you. Don't push them out into the rain. Let them sleep in the attic."

"All right. But only for the season."

Natasha ran to tell Marleen. "The unused west wing is still yours to occupy in any way you please. If you keep to yourself and try not to offend—"

Marleen was not deceived. "How is he going to triple the crop?" She smiled her thinnest smile.

"You'll help him," said Natasha. "And not another word."

"So! Let them bite themselves until they bleed," cried Shura next, her face a fiery red. "Let's send them to the tundras of the north. Let's let Siberia rattle their bones."

She kept shouting to vent her resentment: "If you claim that they are innocent, I counter: 'They are guilty!' We'll fling them to their graves—"

This anger was Natasha's opportunity. She started shedding light.

"I speak of far-off days. Those were not ordinary boys. Ah, yes! Fat! Lightly freckled! Fantastic shadows, memories! They had a sure touch with the rye—"

"They're underfoot in my own kitchen, constantly. We're not yet done with them." Shura looked as if she were caught in a towering rage.

Natasha's voice took on a singsong lilt. "Look. There's a middle way. If you divide the building lengthwise, Shura—"

"What? Never! I said never! I want them out! I need my elbow room."

"They wouldn't bother you. They're down to their last kopeck."

"So?"

A silly smile sat on Natasha's face. Her nose was red and shiny. "Take Marleen, for example. She isn't any threat. She isn't any trouble. She turns her ration cards this way and that and can't see a way out."

"Ha!"

"I'll talk to her. I'll tell her that you claim the wash tub. She can wash in the outside rain barrel."

"And her towels, too! Hear?"

"All right. Of course."

"Make sure she understands that."

"I will. Don't shout. In turn, you share with her your samovar. Don't be pigheaded, Shura—"

"I want all her quilts," yelled Shura. "Tell her, Natasha! Now!" She began to spit venom and spite. "We don't need Germans underfoot. They show contempt for what we're trying to do. I want them out! I want them out and gone!"

"They can sleep in the back chamber, then?" Natasha busied herself with a task. "Or maybe even the attic? It's empty. Full of spiders. The rest of the house will be yours. Let them keep the attic while you keep the rest."

"No. I said no. The barn is good enough," decided Shura angrily, and kicked the premium piglet she had installed beneath the bench in Marleen's summer kitchen. It left its droppings on

the floor and squealed at everyone.

This was a taxing time for Dominik. He learned that he must argue everything. Their excuses were many; his output grew leaner and leaner. Before the year was out, his bloodshot, angry eyes fixed coldly on Marleen.

"They will listen to you. Your word carries weight around here."

"I don't know what you mean. My farming methods are old-fashioned. The future means nothing to me."

He turned to Mimi next. He knew she sided with the government. Her backflips were precision. She wore her fiery cap with pride.

She said to him, keen on the rules: "Forget about my mother. She's useless, Dominik. You're on your own. You have a lot of ingenuity. Use it to your own benefit. The Party counts on you. The Party will reward you."

"Your brothers, then? What might I trade with them?"

The Pioneer glanced swiftly at Larissa. Larissa's eyes glazed over, a tremor ran along her spine, but she said not one word. She simply sat there, silent and demure, while struggling with a sock of Dominik's that had a giant hole.

Soon afterwards, two panting government inspectors came to check the quota yield. They wouldn't go away. Their patience was beginning to run short.

Natasha kept wringing her hands. She watched them prowling through the neighborhood, searching everywhere for hidden grain, testing with an iron rod for loose spots in the earth.

"In a nutshell, details! That's what we need. Details! *Tovarich*! Dominik! Who's in charge around here? Why can't you keep up with your quotas?"

"Just give me time—"

"There is strong proof of sabotage. Right under your own roof! What do you have to say in your defense, *tovarich* Dominik? Someone somewhere must be punished. It might as well be you."

When Dominik was walking through the silent streets surrounding Apanlee, he knew that his footsteps cast fear. He soon began to keep a notebook, and every time he saw a group of Germans, he scribbled something furtively.

They knew that he hated them all. He knew that that was mutual.

He stared at the twins as though they were strangers. They stared at the barns, at the rust-covered tractors without saying a word. He knew forbidden thoughts were sliding through their minds like lances.

"Well, when it rains, it pours," the twins said to each other. Their eyes no longer met. Each had a lot to hide.

Natasha had a lifetime of experience at squeezing joy out of a desperate situation. Each quarrel that Shura and Dominik started, she finished.

"Marleen asks permission to grow her own pig," wheedled Natasha the following week.

"A pig? Did you say pig? The Party frowns on private pigs."

"Forbidden in theory. Allowed in practice."

"No! Never! Not a pig!"

"A piglet. That's all. It's high time you plant your potatoes."

"If she owns anything the Party disallows, she'll be regarded as a wrecker. Piglets are disallowed—"

"She'll feed it dandelion greens!"

"What's next? A private cow?" yelled Dominik.

"A pig. That's all. I swear that's all. Perhaps a bucket, too? Do you want a potato harvest failure? Can you afford that, Dominik? The Party has your file."

Dominik snapped sharply to attention. "As if I didn't know."

"Where are your seed potatoes?"

"Out with the truth. Have they found out the special shipment of the seed potatoes didn't come?"

"They have. They have. And so have all the others. Your wife has the screech of a raven—"

"Are they spying on me? Are they laughing at me? Blast

them to smithereens!"

"They heard your troubles through the wall. A private piglet is a meager price to pay for a potato crop."

"No! I said no!"

"What will you do if the potato crews arrive, dispatched by Comrade Stalin, and you have no potatoes with which to plant the fields?"

"Hush! Not a word!"

"Don't you hush me! Who rocked you through the night when you were feverish? And who looked out for you when you were small and quarrelsome?" She had rehearsed this well. "You listen to your mother! You let Marleen have that piglet. Now! Don't give me an excuse! They're useful. They know how to grow fat potatoes from peels. What is a little piglet by comparison? I'll talk to her. I'll trade you their potato secrets if you will let her have that piglet that's messing up your kitchen. She's got to eat. She'll make it fat, and in the meantime, son, make sure you keep your cool—"

In the following weeks, her wheedling grew louder and louder. "Don't you hush me! Who took your side against the twins? Who fed you jam behind their backs? Do me a favor, will you? A puny cow, that's all."

"I can't. That's too great a risk. I can't afford a blot on my record."

"The season cannot wait. One measly cow. As a personal favor to me."

"I could be shot!" hissed Dominik. "For advocating private property."

She flew into full combat. She started shouting in his face: "A party functionary needs a harvest. You know what happened to three foremen in a neighboring kolkhoz? They marched them to the sand pits. They shot them, one by one."

He started shouting back: "She has a secret file already that's growing thicker by the day. She used to write those Josie letters to rally help from foreign interventionists. "

"I fear for you. I weep for you," Natasha wailed expertly.

"No! I said no!"

"Who swaddled you ten times a day when you had diarrhea? What is a set of horses in return for all the pains your mother suffered, bearing you? It wasn't easy giving birth to you. I might well have died!"

"You said a cow! Now horses, too?"

"They're driving a hard bargain."

"No. No. And no and no!"

"If you don't listen to your mother, your mother will be broken-hearted, for Stalin's commissars will come and they will shoot you dead because of quota lags!" Natasha may have lost her youth—she hadn't lost her tongue. At every opportunity, she lashed and bashed at him to help him fill his quotas. Oh, *bozhe moi!* And pretty soon it will be time to seed new corn, and after corn comes barley."

"It's April, son! You hear? By this time of the year, your father's corn stood three feet tall. You haven't even seeded."

He shook her by the shoulders. "A *schweinehund*! A trickster and exploiter!"

She shouted back: "Who, Hein? A splendid man! A huge and gentle beast!"

"He stole your innocence!"

"I gave it willingly!"

"He used you. He exploited you!"

Why! You ungrateful lout! Three piglets, that is all! You listen to your mother!"

"He never once stood by my side when I was small and barred from feasting at their holidays—"

Natasha yelled defiantly and slammed the door so hard that all the rafters shook: "Ha! Many times! Believe me, many times!"

"Not even once!"

"By your two dirty ears he picked you up and kissed you smackingly!"

But in the end, all was in vain. It was as Dominik declared: a cat dislikes a dog. There was no compromise.

Thus, after having been evicted from her homestead altogether by the pointed finger of a bull-necked commissar who had a camel's nose and stank of onions and wet rags, Marleen moved out of Apanlee.

She did this by degrees, and not without a struggle.

"You don't need a production gap," she said to Dominik before she disappeared, for she had patented her worth. That's how Marleen moved out—head high, jaw locked, and every muscle taut.

She left her home the way a fighting general breaks off battle, resisting, inch by inch. She first moved out into the corridor, then farther down the hall into a narrow pantry, then even farther back behind a thin partition she erected in the barn and, in the end, into the drafty edifice, once occupied by Ivan and Natasha, the hut where Dominik was born.

"He cannot even grasp," Marleen said to Natasha, "how little he can take away!"

Her shoe soles were in shreds; her elbows were frayed; and her skirt had three holes—but oh! her jaw, her stubbonr Prussian jaw! That jaw was chiseled from granite and sharper than ever, now locked in place as though a dead bolt had snapped shut.

Natasha helped her push the bulge of bedding down the hall. "Here. Easy! I said, easy! Don't forget to come back for your grandfather clock. Every day holds a sunrise and sunset."

# Chapter 72

A first-generation homestead, belonging to the Friesen family, just down the road and to the left of the untidy Donoghues, fell beneath the auctioneer's hammer. To the good folks of Mennotown, it felt as though a guillotine's blade had fallen on an honest and innocent head.

The Friesens were as fine a family as ever there lived in Kansas. Ever since the days when Mennotown had been a frontier town, they had led exemplary lives. With them, it was the Ten Commandments to the letter from the cradle to the grave. Their hallmarks were forbearance, stamina, thrift, diligence, persistence and endurance. Their children and their children's children had helped put village after village on the map. And though the Lord had blessed them lavishly and given them not just necessities, but telephones and flivvers, they never stepped outside the norm—at every "Stop" they stopped.

"It's hard to grasp. That kind of life can end in poverty?" said Jan, and let himself fall heavily into his wicker chair. "Where will it end? What's happening to us?"

He knew: in charity, the Friesens had few rivals. If there was

need in someone else's home, they reached into their pockets. They gave as much as they could spare, and often twice as much.

Jan had avoided thinking of the future—beyond next day, next week. He could no longer do so now. The wolf was at the door. He looked down at his hands.

"What is the matter with our country? How can this be? The clothes on their backs is all the Friesens salvage out of a life of honesty and thrift?"

It was incomprehensible.

Doctorjay dipped deep into a hidden kitty and came up with a fistful of dollars no one knew he had still stashed away. He bought the Friesen farm before the usurers foreclosed, which was a stroke of genius, and neighborly besides. He bought their inventory, too—all of it, lock, stock, and barrel. He did that without wasting words. His mustache bristled with the challenge. His oldest son, a licensed dentist with an enameled name plate next to his own, no longer drilled teeth; he recommended quick extractions which went for half the price. Between them, they had pooled their savings.

"Once you're on your feet again," said Doctorjay to the despondent farmer who looked as if his eyes had turned as stony as the dark side of the moon, "I'll let you buy it back."

Soon, Doctorjay took over parcel after parcel from his neighbors.

Three sons-in-law came visiting. They circled Jan like three determined birds, and in the end the bravest said: "It's about your mortgage, Dad."

"Leave things to me," said Jan in such a voice that they could say no more. They left, discussing in hushed voices the tragedy that had befallen their most highly esteemed leader.

He watched them grimly from the window, and knew what they were saying: "Jan is a changed and different man." He knew that they were right. Before his illness laid him low, he would have started to rebuild before the embers died.

When Lizzy asked: "Jan, are you going somewhere—?" he

said he didn't know.

"You need more rest, Jan."

"That's it. Rest."

"Just give it lots of time."

Time? Jan had nothing else but time. Time weighed on Jan, each minute like a bar bell. An hour was a mountain. A day seemed an eternity.

Jan yearned for corn with firm, fat ears, for barley that swished as it fell. He longed to rake and bind and stack the grain of yesteryear, but the doctors kept shaking their heads. The Wichita doctors that Josie had summoned, this against every instinct in his bones, had warned him, again and again: "Bedrest! Bedrest! Old fellow, can't you see what you are doing to yourself?"

There was the daily walk, meanwhile, to pick up everybody's mail. Jan did that each morning at nine.

Next came a slow walk to the park. A slow stroll to the firehouse. He peered in empty windows. He studied the signs: "We're firing—not hiring." Many door frames were broken or sagging.

On his way back, he sometimes stopped by Little Melly's porch because she didn't scatter high-flown phrases, she said things in plain English.

"It is a shocking thought," said she, "that so much toil can end in poverty."

It pleased him that she stored his words. She echoed his opinions. She was as comforting to Jan as old and well-worn slippers. "Come sit here. By my side. For just a little while? So you can catch your breath?" She snatched his hand. She had even tried some palmistry on him by studying his calluses. "Your troubles will soon end."

She said to Jan: "Here. Take my chair to sit on. Why don't you stay for supper?" but he replied: "No. Thanks. I can't. Is it true you are taking in boarders?"

"Despite my age and rheumatism, yes."

She knew, like no one else: a penny had to stretch. She shopped for everything according to how durable it was and not

how good it looked. Her pantry had no sugar left, but she had no complaint. She might still go to Wichita to finger wares in stores, but the Depression taught her self-control; she always put them back.

"The soft days are over. Right, Jan? The lavish days are gone?"

His thin smile held no joy. "Yes. You're right. The good old days are gone."

She studied him obliquely. Here was old dirt to pay. She, Little Melly, well remembered how, any time it struck her fancy, Josie used to visit far-flung relatives in Winnipeg or Calgary or even as far as Vancouver, and never mind the Coupon Clipping Afternoon or Dewey's Indian Mission. And now?

Jan's Josie walked around with cardboard in her soles like everybody else, but did she help scrub Dewey's church? No. Did she stitch quilts to aid his Vagrant Mission? Hardly.

Jan said to Little Melly: "It breaks my heart. Last night, I heard her cry."

"Tears," said the spinster firmly, "are sent to us to wash our eyes so we can better read the Ten Commandments." She laid it out for him: the Lord was very, very angry, with the good and with the bad. He made the weather fickle. He manifested his displeasure by ruining the crops. Now that it was agreed by all the world was steeped in sin, why didn't Josie let herself be rescued and redeemed? Dewey would gladly lend a hand, if only Josie asked.

Jan took a feeble stand. "Well, don't we all know Josie?"

"Yes, don't we know she has an awful monkey on her back?"

No longer did Jan's Josie look as though she'd stepped out of the pages of a novel. Both elbows were now frayed. When Dewey talked of Jesus Christ—what Christ could do for Josephine—she covered her ears with her hands.

The previous year, wheat prices had dropped sharply, surged once, then dropped again. The weather had destroyed the winter crop as well. Good farmers everywhere, industrious and loyal,

all of them having struggled on their homestead ever since the days of dark and bitter wheat, now found themselves in court, then left their farms with not a penny in their pockets.

"We must vote in the Democrats next time around," said Dewey now, who always, in the past, had voted straight Republican. "I guess the last election was a blunder?"

This was the newest fad. The Methodists were getting into that, into the risky business of switching votes and siding with the have-nots. The bonesetter was into that. Now that the crusty healer had hitched himself to Abigail, switching parties didn't seem so odd.

Doctorjay went checking up on politics at Dewey's Dole and recognized three business friends from Wichita with whom he had made deals in better days, when money was as plentiful as daisies in the meadows.

What he encountered shocked him to the core.

Here stood his counterparts, enfeebled and defeated, resigned to fate and accident, in line with panhandlers and vagabonds, while Dewey, Archie at his elbow, helped them to put their souls in order before he let them help themselves to slices of stale bread. The bread was green and moldy at the edges, but Dewey said: "Still edible!" His yield was rich. Ten sinners in one day!

"Our Congress in paralysis?" said Doctorjay to Dewey in hopes of sparking a lively argument. He had brought Abigail along, who tied her handkerchief around her neck instead of wearing it, where it belonged, deep in her left-hand pocket.

"No! You don't say!" squealed Abigail, to reinforce her husband. "For once, the little people in this country get a chance?"

Dewey merely glared at Abigail. That one was still the kind that tried to make men blush. She had smooth skin and costly tastes, and Doctorjay had change to spare, which was a miracle, considering. He lavished it on Abigail. He was agog with Abigail.

"God is your only hope," said Dewey sourly. "Just put your trust in Him. The sins of pride and vanity must go. They must be rooted out."

"The union people claim this time around they will elect a

Democrat," boomed Doctorjay, and winked at Abigail. He now was shaving twice a day. They were seen holding hands.

"There is no way to stop modernity," mourned Dewey.

The healer, checking up on Jan so he could sound him out on politics, took one of Lizzy's towels, spread it across Jan's chest and, putting his big ear upon it, listened carefully.

"You're getting stronger, Jan. I am an optimist. Something good is bound to happen. A fine solution will turn up. Within four weeks, you'll be as good as new. Maybe you, too, should vote the Democrats into the White House? What do you say? At least, there's money still in Washington. Look how they're spending it. It cannot get much worse."

Jan sagged a little from a hearty blow delivered for the sake of sentiment. "I am too old and useless to change my voting habits."

"You old? You useless?" cried a stricken Doctorjay, and slapped Jan's shoulder with such force a little puff of dust rose up in the air. "Don't give me your excuses. Just stop that nonsense! Stop it! I order you: just cut it out! Another week in bed is all you need. Just take my word for it. Raw carrot juice! Before this year is out, you'll sprint down that long road again just like the yearling that you are. Right, Josie? Josephine?"

"I wish you wouldn't wink."

"Who, me? I never wink. Right, Abigail?" Already he was on a roll, oblivious. "A man can't live on air and on surmises. Stick out your tongue, old fellow. Here. Step up, Jan. Right this way. To the window. So I can study it. See? There you go. Your tongue is all right. Your tongue still looks like forty—"

"It's not his tongue," said Josie, furious. "It's his attitude. His spirits."

The healer chose to stay the course. He gazed at her attentively. "I'm twelve years older than your husband. And look at me. Still going strong. Ask Abigail about last night—"

"Stop it," said Josie, beneath her breath. "Just stop it. Stop it. Stop it."

"What did I say?"

"If you must ask, then you don't need to know."

"To spruce your marriage up a bit, perhaps you should take Abigail into your confidence?" He tickled her under the chin. She practically took off his scalp. She spilled her coffee on herself. Her hands were shaking badly. But Doctorjay was Doctorjay, banking on his instincts. He blew a cloud of smoke into her eyes, for he could not leave well enough alone:

"Say, Josie! Did you hear the latest joke?"

"No. And I hope I never will."

"It comes straight from the horse's mouth."

"So? Spare me, Doctorjay."

"From Henry Ford himself. Here's what he said. He said: 'If I had the money, these days, would I be driving a Ford?' Pretty funny? Huh? Is that a joke? Or what?"

"A joke that splits my sides."

"You used to laugh at Ford jokes," pouted Doctorjay.

"I did? I can't remember."

"I have a joke for you," said Jan. "Here goes. What is a Hooverflag?"

The healer scratched his pate. "A Hooverflag? Beats me."

"Try harder. What's a Hooverflag?"

"What *is* a Hooverflag?"

"Pockets turned inside out. Ha-ha! What is a Hooverwagon?"

"Jan, no idea. No idea!"

"A gasless flivver—dragged by mules."

"Say! That's funny! That is funny!"

"Yes, isn't it? What's Hooverville?"

The village healer sobered up. "Enough. That's taking things too far."

You had your pride; you leaned on that pride. You couldn't find a slum in Mennotown—not yet!—unless you counted in the Donoghues who were a world apart. You flew the American flag, no matter that the paint was peeling badly on the trusty wooden pole. As long as you had that, you still had hope and trust. A Roosevelt had done well once—another Roosevelt was rising fast,

according to the dailies, and he was fond of sausage, beer and babies.

Most farmers felt that way about the Democratic candidate who promised boosts for the economy. These were resilient folks; that was their hall mark; belt-tightening was nothing new; they knew how to do it. They'd done it before; they would do it again. The Lord was just testing their fabric.

"No matter what," said Doctorjay, "we'll stick it out and, in the end, emerge triumphantly." There was still pride in battle on the prairie. So what if, temporarily, you scraped the bottom of your kitty? It only strengthened your intentions.

"In Hoover we trusted. Soon we'll be busted," the faith healer philosophized.

"What's that I see," gushed Little Melly. "A brand new pair of shoes?"

"That's right," said Josephine. "I needed them. They were on sale. I threw away a pair last week because they showed my toes."

"Two dozen bushels of good wheat to buy a single pair of shoes," sighed Lizzy.

"Not counting the laces. Not counting the laces," said Josie.

"Sooner or later," prophesied Jan, not even smiling at his words, "she'll overspend herself. She's bound to meet her Waterloo. Is that not right? Is that what everybody thinks?"

But Doctorjay just snorted. Waterloo was here.

Josie picked up the paper that lay on her porch, provoking a tiny explosion of dust. She glanced at the headlines to get herself riled up on wrath.

"Look here! Look here! This Adolf-what's-his-name? He's poking at the hornets' nest again. That man is dangerous. That's religion, over there. That's not politics—"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"This man and our own illustrious Elder," decided Josie, whose tastes had always run to odd comparisons, "run on identi-

cal fuel. Both claim that the Jews have cooked up the Depression."

"Maybe they're right?" Such was the common thought.

"Be fair!" demanded Josie fiercely, in search of any audience. Political matters were fuel for her feverish brain, oil on her liberal embers. She had a shrewd, discriminating eye. She had her own deep wounds. She spread her fingers wide to amplify her theory: both claimed the stewardship of God. Both knew exactly what was good for everybody else. Both had a cross they claimed had mystic powers. Both robbed you of the here and now by promising rewards in the beyond.

Which was a fraud. A laugh.

That's what she said. But that was Josephine. No wonder that she was ignored in her own family.

Jan took the paper from her hand. "Calm down. Calm down. We have our own diversionists right here. Our country's in a hopeless muddle."

She gave a trembling sigh. "I know."

"If rain does not come soon—"

"Yes. Yes. I know! I know!"

"Don't be so angry, Josie."

"Me? Angry?"

"So listen, will you? Now?"

"Can't we have an intelligent discussion around here? Besides the trouble with the land? The weather?"

"Come here. Sit right by me. Let us discuss the Führer. We must help the poor persecuted Jews in Germany? We must help Russia? Is that what you're trying to say?"

"We used to do those things. We used to be America."

"What's Russia to us? What's Germany to us? We have our troubles here. We're tightening our belts. Let's clean up our own backyard before we take on other people's woes—"

"Remember Apanlee? You used to think that Apanlee—"

"It isn't," said Jan slowly, now shuffling after Josie while she kept up her back to him, "as if they had to stay and suffer their calamities. Nobody made them stay in Russia. Nobody makes

Jews stay in Germany. When there is trouble, you just leave. You just pack up and leave. My parents left. Your parents left. The door is open. Why don't they just get up and leave, avoiding all their woes—"

She swung around. She practically shrieked. "Then do what you are advocating. How often must I beg? Let's go to California. Let's you and I and Rarey pack up and go to California."

"What on earth for?"

"There is no point in staying here. We need a brand new start."

"Our place is here. In Mennotown. In Kansas."

"Sure! To the bitter end."

And so, that desperate, darkening summer, Jan tried to fit together the pieces of a landscape which he no longer understood, despair beneath his eyelids, stubble on his chin.

# Chapter 73

Jan had lots of time to take in rousing speeches. He took in several.

The government had solid plans, he learned, to pay the Kansas farmers to leave the soil untilled so as to save on fuel. That was a notion so preposterous it made Jan think that Dewey might be right: Who was behind the unions? Who was behind the country's worsening malaise?

Unspoken words. the Jews.

It wasn't violent or coarse. It was just there, edged in the craggy faces that centuries had carved. The Jews were Jews, the neighbors knew, and couldn't be reformed. The ancient blood of Christ could not redeem the Jews. They wanted your money to share with unworthy people, a thousand pardons, Josephine! Among themselves, they called each other liars, but linking hands, they swindled you out of your house and home.

Meanwhile, the feds had plans galore. The government assured the citizens of Mennotown via the wireless: the days of woe would end; the doldrums were a temporary phase. The country was resilient. The country would recover. The good

times would be back.

Huge taxes were levied on wheat.

The farmers salted the earth with their tears. There was no sympathy in Washington for Kansas.

Stories are told of difficult days, wearisome days, which seemed to last forever. And still the drought dragged on. The future seemed darker than blindness.

The relatives watched in stunned silence as several bank officials came and repossessed three tractors that Jan had bought on credit a year before the fire.

A throbbing vein stood out on Jan's left temple. "I'll get them back," he said. "I know who is responsible. They're destroying from within."

This wasn't said out loud, but everybody knew, while watching White House bureaucrats spew lofty, silly notions: where the riffraff was gathering now, Jewish slogans could always be heard.

Jan came to that conclusion slowly. But there it was—he could no longer close his eyes; it was as Little Melly said: the banksters in New York had engineered America's demise so they could lend their money to the government to bail it out again.

He even said as much, to a round of stony faces who gathered at the Chamber.

The neighbors nodded, since he spoke their thoughts. They hadn't noticed it before, but now they noticed clearly: the Jews were everywhere. They always studied Christians with eyes of bitter envy.

What did they want? More blood.

They hid their eyes behind sunglasses. They never said: "Come. Share some bread and tea." They didn't say: "Come spend the day!" except perhaps to Josephine who still consoled herself with visits to the Finkelsteins, wasting long evenings in endless and futile discussion.

"How can you rob me of that joy?" she said to Jan, and he had no reply.

She went alone. He stayed behind. It was a dusty day. The

clouds hung very low, blotting out the sun. He was assailed by troubling thoughts and images, most all of which were gloomy.

Jan tried to focus on the inner light, but all was gray on gray.

His preacher, Jan discovered as days dragged on with no relief in sight, had a decided point.

"They are Jews from the day they are born. And that's how they die, still Jewish," said Dewey.

"There's not a single country in the world that does not hate the hook nose," was Dewey's point of view. "They push their origins of species."

Jan merely listened quietly, not up to any argument. Whether this was truth or merely rumor was very hard to tell, but logic made you leap to the conclusion that people so consistently, so universally disliked across the span of centuries must have brought that hatred on themselves.

The sun beat on the prairie brutally. The dust blew hard all summer. The worries of the grain belt deepened. The Oklahoma relatives stayed on.

Each Sunday, Dewey preached. The faithful hung their heads.

That, too, was part of the old covenant, part of the pattern of seeing one's life go around in a time-proven, time-tested loop. Once more, the Lord was testing them, but He was on their side. Regardless. Old Lizzy never doubted that. The covenant was hers.

She might be poor in copper pennies, but she was rich in certitude. Love and devotion for her Lord were welling in her heart. The Lord had never turned His face away from her. Why would He now? No way.

Life was a hurdle and a chore. A quarter had to stretch. You argued the greengrocer's prices. Keeping the gas meter down was a challenge.

From April to October, not a single drop of rain fell on Kansas. The rafters creaked and moaned.

Josie listened to her husband's footsteps in the middle of the

night and knew: "The winds are stripping the top soil."

First died the corn as the dust clouds brought death to the plains.

The winter wheat was hardier; it struggled for a while, trying to anchor the soil, but it was a hopeless endeavor.

The wind blew hard. Dust swirled.

The thermometer soared.

Flies came in clouds and settled on the cattle.

Beans, potatoes, onions, turnips, cabbage, pumpkins, cucumbers, and melons—everything dried up. Cows went dry for lack of fodder. Laying hens stopped being laying hens.

The birds flew in panic before the black blizzards. Flivvers slid into dry ditches. Trains stalled, sometimes derailed. The train conductors could no longer see the warning signals, for all was black on black.

Each day, huge clouds of dust rolled over Mennotown, and not a ray of sun could pierce the dusty air. The winds downed several telephone poles, disrupting the lifeline of gossip. The chickens keeled over, beaks open, and died. The dogs lay, whimpering, their tails between their legs, and Lizzy's cattle huddled with curved backs and snorted with the effort of sucking in their breath.

Jan tried to ride his tractor once or twice, scorning every warning his heart would not hold out, armed with a set of goggles and a wet handkerchief across his creased, sand-pitted face, but he was back before noon.

The storm, said Jan, collapsing, just ripped the seed out of his hands, the plants out of his furrows, his heart out of his aching chest. His lungs were on fire. His eyes saw dust on dust.

He sat there, stupefied. The heat was such that it was hard to breathe.

"What's happening to us?" he asked repeatedly, to which no one could answer. The wind howled its reply.

It plucked stalk after stalk out by its roots. The dust storms came howling again, lifting the powder-dry soil in the east and

dumping it over Mennotown, along the fences and into the orchards. The drifts of soil behind the beehives were higher than a man.

For an eternity, it seemed, no ray of sun broke through the flying dust of Kansas. The winds rose with the sun and died down with the sun, and all night long the Kansas soil fell down on Mennotown in spades.

A landscape bleak and bare!

It was, moaned Lizzy, coughing rackingly, the end of the world, the end of all life on this earth.

Old Lizzy was dying in earnest, surrounded by her loved ones, all visiting on Sunday afternoons despite the winds that would not be appeased, all praying with her patiently so she could stealthily pass on from life to death, from Faith to certainty as, gasp by gasp and day by day, her loyal heart gave out.

She sat silent, caved into herself, by the window, struggling for breath, moaning softly to herself so she would not disturb her grandson's aimless doodling. So let Rarey scribble maps of California while she was dying slowly—instead of sitting by her side and holding her old hand!

No one said a word.

The Hillsbury gravedigger blew in for a timely visit and stayed all afternoon, and Lizzy rose herself sufficiently to brew his coffee, coughing, and told him in detail, exactly, how to conduct his business.

"I promise you. Exactly as you wish."

She held up all ten of her fingers, though he could barely see, what with the dust that kept on swirling even in her kitchen. "Ten steps away from Herberts grave," she told him, coughing rackingly. This might be her last chance to make the most of widowhood.

"Nobody wants to be neglected, not even after death," she said repeatedly to Josephine. "I have few wishes left. I'd like to specify—"

But Josie only shrugged. It was as if a race had run its course.

There was no more to say.

Josie ran from room to room and fought the dust like a woman possessed. The day was thick with shadows. The darkness pressed against her window panes.

She tried to keep the windows shuttered, itself no easy task. She tried to seal her doors against the raging winds.

Each morning, long before the sun came up, she hung wet sheets in every crevice. And still the dust crept in.

Josie wet a kitchen towel, pressed it to her face so she could breathe easy without choking on the dust, and went out to look for mail, drawing it from the mailbox in a great puff of dust. She laid the batch beside Jan's morning coffee cup. The dust swirled all around it. She said to his bent back:

"Dewey's having a rain dance tonight."

"I know."

"Are you going, Jan? If so, don't count on me."

"Why not?"

"I still have to finish—"

What was it that she had to finish? The dust had choked that thought. Gray, choking dust was everywhere she looked: on her sills, in her dishes, on her lips that cracked and hurt.

Jan spoke up sharply then. "The Lord must be appeased."

"The Lord," said Josephine, "is nowhere to be seen."

She tried to tape the windows shut to keep the dust clouds out. She kept on wedging rags beneath her doors; she stuffed wet towels up the chimney. There was dust in her hair, dust in her eyes, dust on her tongue, dust in her soul.

And yet. What powered Josie, even then: her dream of California.

"Somewhere out there, there's California," said Josie to herself, for now she hardly ever spoke to anyone except her inner self. "It's hard to fathom, but somewhere, out there, in the far distance, an ocean still exists."

The relatives stepped up their prayers. Little Melly came over to help the good relatives pray. Together they sang and they

prayed— their melodies painfully slow.

Josie kneaded her bread in a drawer so the relatives had something to eat. She kept the yeast she needed in a special Mason jar, the flour in a bucket with a lid. She tried to keep the lid shut, gumming it with tape and putty. But still the dust invaded her flour, her yeast.

When she made all those beds the Oklahoma relatives still occupied, she shook the dust off of the covers while they were busy, praying. They sapped her energy. The dust lay simply everywhere. There was dust in Josie's nostrils and gritty dust between her toes. There was grit ingrained in every finger joint, grit in her eyes, grit in her teeth.

She went to rinse her mouth each hour on the hour, but there was no relief from feeling filthy—as filthy and as helpless as she had felt in her whole life.

When Jan said: "Josie, will you please—" she said to Jan: "Shut up!"

When it was clear to all that Lizzy had finally caught a serious case of dust pneumonia and would not last the night, Jan moved his mother into Josie's bed. "Move over as far as you can."

"But it's my bed. It's the only privacy I have—"

"She needs someone to keep a careful eye on her. Just try to sleep lightly. I'll sleep on the couch."

So Josie moved over and Lizzy kept on dying. "Say something, lovey. Please. Say something," whimpered Lizzy. "Why don't you talk to me?" Old Lizzy couldn't understand why Josie wept so desperately when Lizzy tried so hard to do her best, to make herself as small as possible while she was busy dying.

In the end, Josie raised herself upon a tired elbow, saying softly: "I'll just spend the night sitting up. You can have the bed to yourself."

Jan sat in the dark by the window.

"I need to talk to you, " said Josie. "Jan, listen. Can we talk? I need to talk to you. I want to talk to you."

"So talk."

"What do you mean? How can we talk? We have no privacy. I am a stranger in my bed. I am a stranger in my kitchen. No matter where I step these days, I'm stepping on a praying mantis."

"They are my kin. They have no place to go. I cannot fail them now."

"There's always someone underfoot—"

"They're relatives."

"Why don't you send them back? It's not as if, these days, we have that much to share. Do we have any privacy at all where we can sit and talk?"

Jan shifted the weight on his heart. "I feel like a tree whose trunk has been hollowed. What have I done? Where have I sinned? I must repent, and so must you. It is our only chance."

A shriek sat deep in Josie's throat. She fought against it savagely. She managed to say this: "Religious prying is as indecent as probing body cavities. That's my opinion. Now you know."

"You are a total stranger."

"Jan, why are you sitting alone in the dark? Why don't you light a candle?"

"It costs too much."

"How you have changed."

"The seasons change. We change."

She had run out of words. She pulled up a chair and wiped across her burning eyes and tried to read his face.

"She's dying, finally," said Josie. "She's dying in my bed. I can't sleep in a bed where someone else is dying. This is my final word: get her out of my bed—"

Jan told her in a tone so cold that it sent shivers down her spine: "Tomorrow morning, eight o'clock, there's going to be a revival. I order you to come."

"Did you hear what I said? Your mother's dying in my bed—"

"It is her bed," said Jan. "You are her guest. Now hush."

"Jan, please—"

"Such battering as we've endured these past three years does not fall on the righteous. It falls on sinning souls so that they may repent. No doubt we sinned. I sinned. You sinned. We have no options left. We must repent or perish."

The silence grew and grew. Jan said at last: "And yet, I still remember you. When I kissed you, you tasted of sunshine and parsley. When I made love to you—"

"Enough."

"My love for you," said Jan, "was not a potato. Why did you throw it out the window? At least grant me an honest answer—"

"And once upon a time," said Josephine, and didn't think her heart could hold such grief, "I looked at life, I looked at love, much as a sculptor looks at marble. I was going to carve out a thing of great beauty. I was an artist once. I had such strength. I had such dreams. Your people broke my chisel. I will not let that happen to my son."

"Leave Rarey out of this. In truth—"

She felt as dry and barren as the soil, her soul as pitted as her windows. "In truth? You do not want to know the truth—"

"But I do. I cannot think of anything to give me more relief."

"All right. Here is the truth. You are like Abraham. You're cruel and unfeeling. Your God is vengeful, harsh and mean. You'll sacrifice your son as you have sacrificed your wife. For what? Tradition? Family? It's all a stranglehold—"

"There's nothing in this world," said Jan, "that's more important, next to Faith, than one's own loving family."

"So you will throw your own son to the wolves?"

"We are links in a chain. Spokes in a wheel. It's not just you and me and Rarey. It's everyone. It's more. We're kin. We're folk. We all belong together. Something is strangling us. What is it?"

"Just do yourself a favor and send those relatives away. As far as I'm concerned, they're just a bunch of strangers—"

"You are the stranger here."

"I now repeat: you'd rather throw your own son to the wolves?"

"I failed you. There's no doubt in my heart that I failed you. Yet I loved you. For so many years, I loved you and loved you and loved you—"

"Yes. By some sorry trick of fate," said Josephine, "you up and married me."

And yet another day. The worst. The sun's hard beams clubbed Mennotown. The howling winds brought ever-deepening disaster.

Day turned to night long before noon, and night became a nightmare. The soil lay thick on Lizzy's window sill, clung to her roof, crept through the smallest chinks. The earth was lifted to the sky, and then fell back on Mennotown and settled on its roofs, a suffocating blur.

It started choking everything.

It strangled Rarey's rabbits. It snuffed out Little Melly's honey bees. It suffocated Josie's last small shred of patience. And on that dark and muggy morning, finally, the dust clouds came and smothered Lizzy Neufeld. She died at ninety years of age. Her Savior did not hide from her the secret of longevity, but in the end, she died.

# Chapter 74

They bedded Lizzy in the cracked and dusty ground, clothed in her finest chemise. The *Wichita Eagle* sent a reporter to tally the extended clan who stood around her grave in tears—a hundred and twenty-six souls.

The minister spoke suitably—an out-of-towner, sadly, for Dewey pulled his head between his shoulder blades and simply shook his head. This borrowed preacher, too, had known Old Lizzy well; he started coughing and then set to weeping and said he couldn't finish, and Doctorjay stepped up to Lizzy's grave and ended his sermon for him. Though his voice was gritty as the sand he felt between his teeth, the healer spoke with firm authority, and what he told the grieving people condensed the essence that was Lizzy by acclaim.

"A prairie pioneer," said Doctorjay, "has gone to meet her Maker. I vouch for this: if there are meadows in the sky, she'll always take two buckets."

Before the day wore down, Jan struggled through the dust to thank Little Melly for her support in his helpless and feverish

days.

She spied him at once from her window.

"And how are you?" Jan asked, collapsing in a chair. "How are you holding up?"

"As well as can be expected." She tried pushing the cat from her lap. "And you?"

"Still that strange numbness in my fingers. The trees still sway. Sometimes I think that Josie might be right. I may have had a stroke."

"Impossible," said Little Melly, forcefully.

"How can you say that, Missy?"

A treacherous color crept into her face. "Had it been a stroke, Jan, you would not remember—"

Jan looked at her through sheets of gauze and thought: "Yes, I remember. I remember. I remember you gathering bluebells and poppies."

She looked at him through clouded eyes as well: "This old and broken man was once my sun-burned love."

"Of course. Of course I still remember everything," he told her softly, just sitting there, stroking one hand with the other. "We both remember. Don't we?"

Her nose and cheeks were red. Her hands were trembling badly. "How could we not remember? That's all that's left. Just memories."

"I am so tired, Missy."

"I wish I—" she said helplessly, and found no words to finish.

He said at last: "Let's talk about it finally. You know me well. You know that in my heart I never called you anything but Missy—"

She sputtered nonsense now. "When the Donoghues burned down your mill, you might have—might have suffered just a little embryo."

That jolted him. He leaned back in his chair. "A what?"

"An embryo. I looked it up in Doctorjay's fat doctor book."

A tiny smile sat in the corners of his mouth. "Don't try to

imitate. She isn't you. She's Josie. You are Missy. You mean an embolism, don't you?"

"I guess. Could be. It's all the same to me. It was no stroke, however. It's nothing, Jan. You will prevail. You'll overcome. You'll rally as you always do. We count on you, Jan Neufeld."

"Remember our squirrel hunts?" he said with a wry smile, since he could read her easily. "You were so little then you barely came up to my knees."

She cleared the dust coat from her throat: "See what I mean? It was no stroke. You do remember everything—"

"Yes, I remember everything."

She spoke against a wall of tears. "Things aren't going very well?"

"So-so."

"I heard you had to sell a wagon load of barley to buy your son a brand new set of brushes?"

" There was no point in waiting any longer."

The spinster's voice was out of breath as if she had been running up a hill. "That's not what I was told."

"Now, Missy. Missy. Missy."

"How is the *wunderkind*? Still stretching his own boundaries? Discovering frontiers?"

"He's gone. She's packed him off today. You know about his talent. She wrote to everybody and then some and helped him win that talent scholarship—"

"The modern Hebrew school?"

"Top-notch. Top-notch! Lord, how I'll miss the youngster! As soon as he's through junior high, she'll send him out to California—"

"Oh? California? You don't say. And whose idea was that?"

He said, after a long pause: "Your tongue is still as pointed as your needle. Oh, Missy. Just for once. Just don't let Josie be the scapegoat for all the sins of Israel." He looked at her. She looked at him, and in the end, she dropped her gaze. "Where, pray, is California?" asked Little Melly, and blew her nose into a carefully embroidered handkerchief. "No relatives live there.

What's wrong with Mennotown? What's wrong with our school? The primer, the Psalter and the prayer books are fine."

"Rarey will need more than Mennotown can offer. He is a bookish child. Besides—"

"Jan, how are you going to pay for all that nonsense?"

"Perhaps I could take out a loan—"

"She could have saved up for a rainy day," said Little Melly lamely. "Like everybody else."

Between long silences, he asked: "Are you all right? You don't look well."

"Angina. That's what it is. Angina. The Wichita doctors look grim."

"What's Doctorjay's opinion?"

"He came up with a tonic to thin and purify the blood."

"Well, are you taking it?"

"Of course."

Jan spoke into the fading day: "I failed you. Don't think that I don't know. I feel I ought to tell you. At least I owe you that. I failed you miserably. I should have looked harder to find you a husband. I made you miss out on so much. I let you down so bad—"

"Jan, no. Please. Don't. You never let me down. Just knowing you—"

"I let you down. I let her down. I loved you, Missy, but I loved Josie more." He took a trembling breath. "I was so much in love with her I didn't think my heart could hold it in. I know today that kind of love was wrong. But you—" He leaned forward, unfurling her cramped fingers. "—you, Missy, were always in my thoughts."

The spinster did not think she could survive his eyes. " I have my church. I have my duties. I belong to six charity clubs—"

"I broke your heart."

"My Savior mended it."

"You should have had ten children—"

"I have Dewey's grandchildren now. They all say their

prayers. They all do their chores. I love them all, but Archie—" Her words tumbled over each other. "—Archie is my favorite. I know he will go far. I look at him and know: I have to steer him well. The Holy Spirit burns in him; he'll have to go and serve the Lord in far-off places to drain off extra zeal. If he stays here, in Mennotown, he'll split the church wide open."

"Let's not talk about Archie. Let's talk of you and me. I failed you. God knows I know I failed you—"

She sighed and folded her hands: "You didn't, Jan. You didn't. For, see? You were mine once." Her lip started trembling. "I cannot tell you how that helps." Her hands were no longer her own. She dropped a spool of thread. He bent to retrieve it for her. She said to his bent neck: "What did she ever own that wasn't mine to start?"

He stood. The words came by themselves.

"If only I had loved you half as much as you loved me, I would have been a happy man. I wanted you to know that. Be sure to take your tonic, hear? I better go—"

"Go where?" she asked, as they stood, face to face.

"Go home," said Jan. "Where else?"

The morning after Lizzy's funeral, Jan went to the Mennotown Bank to apply for a government loan. Even after he made up his mind, he kept rounding the block as though rounding the Horn, and when he finally pushed back the door and stepped into the building, he saw himself confronted by none other than a smirking Donoghue who sat behind a desk, on his lapel a pink Roosevelt button.

With salary plus benefits behind his name and therefore in fine fettle, this newly hired program agent flashed Jan a toothy smile behind a walrus mustache.

"What's new, old chap? What brings you here? A little business, eh? Between the two of us?"

Jan knew at once: this is a man of cruelty and hatred. He told the knave who, he had every reason to suspect, had thrown the match that laid his life to ashes: "My Congress voted in a meas-

ure to help the farmers out. I am here to apply for the Barnyard Subsidy Loan."

The lout loved every minute. His eyes turned into narrow slits. "You've exhausted your savings account? Dear me. Dear me. How careless."

Jan wrought a meager smile that came from the pits of his shame. "Three devastating summers in a row—" He watched himself as though he watched a stranger. "I need a helping hand."

The Donoghue turned chatty. ""Don't we all wish for just a little rain? For just a tiny tinkle?"

Jan steadied himself, leaned forward, bit hard on his tongue, and endured. He spoke as calmly as he could, his heart wrung by affliction.

"I am a farmer, and in need. I need my government to lend a helping hand. I am not talking hand-outs. I am not talking charity. I want a loan. I am applying for a loan."

"You know the latest slogan? 'Sell an apple a day. Send the Depression away.'"

Laden as he was with sorrow and a headache pounding in his skull as though it were a hammer, Jan nonetheless said to himself: A punch would send this louse to Idaho. Aloud, he asked: "Don't waste my time. I'd like to see the papers."

The leftist started fingering some folders. He did not meet Jan's eyes. Three or four minutes ticked away. Here's what he said, at last, and in a careful voice:

"These days, broke farmers come a dime a dozen."

Jan's fists had gripped the desk. "I want the papers. Now."

The leftist's glance stopped darting back and forth and fixed itself on Jan's moist forehead. He gave a discreet smile. He flexed his fingers, snapping them as though for exercise, and finally said this: "Why throw good money after bad?"

"Give me the application forms. I said now. Not tomorrow."

"No, no. That's not how it's done. This eligibility business is tough. First, I must ask some qualifying questions. What are you doing, Mister, to better your position?"

"For this remark," said Jan, now leaning forward also, "you

should carry your nose in a sling."

The leftist spilled a bit of coffee on himself. "Well, now. Let's see. Let's see. No need to get so uppity. No need to get so huffy."

"I don't have all day."

"You're broke? Huh? Is that it? Your head is on the block? Well. You don't say! So. Now you're learning, finally, how other people feel. Say! Do you know that you may be entitled to some vouchers?"

"What vouchers?"

"To buy some surplus food the government stores up. At reasonable prices."

"I'm not broke. I still have land. I need a temporary lift. As soon as the weather improves—"

The grin was ear to ear. "In olden days, your money used to do some fancy cartwheels, I recall?"

"It's called the Barnyard Loan," said Jan, a study in restraint. "It's at attractive interest."

"I remember the wonderful things that you tried to do for the unfortunate people in Russia—" The agent gave his thigh a violent smack with the palm of his hand and leaned forward. "—while your own country's citizens went begging for a raise? Do you remember that? Are you still sending help abroad? Instead of taking care of your own needy folks at home?"

Jan had an odd sensation: he felt as though warm blood had started spurting from his neck. He asked between clenched teeth: "What's this about eligibility? What are the rules?"

"They vary. They vary. It all depends on how needy you are." The leftist regarded Jan as though he were a fish in an aquarium. "See this huge stack of paperwork? More than two hundred applications. Two hundred-some fat applications. I'll put you in line, but let me tell you! Forewarned is forearmed. You'll have to wait your turn. See this fat stack? Loan applications from all over Sedgwick County. Guys who all need a helping hand as badly as you do. Those hard-luck stories never stop. It gets kinda old, if you know what I mean—"

A searing headache split Jan's skull, but he had learned with Dewey's help: the task before him was humility. His undue pride and vanity had led to his demise. He struggled hard against the blur that threatened to destroy his vision. He heard the dust howl through the attic of the bank he had helped build in better days. His hands became fists. He leaned forward.

"Now. I said now."

"Let's do an inventory for a starter, shall we?" said the ruffian, all condescension suddenly. "Look, I'm here to help. Let's peer into a crystal ball. Let's see what we come up with. Let's take an inventory—"

"Inventory?"

"Inventory. Right."

"What of?"

"A list of things that you still own. Land. Buildings. Farm equipment. Livestock. All mortgaged, right? All mortgaged to the hilt?"

"Most everything I own," said Jan, a robot now, "is mortgaged. Mortgaged to the hilt. My land. My home. My livestock. My farm machinery."

The Donoghue had risen now and started circling him, feeling pleasantly giddy.

"My! My! I guess you'll have to face the music. How times have changed. How times have changed. It used to be that—"

"Now if you'll kindly hand me every piece of paper that I need—"

"Your interests and mine," the leftist told him next, "coincide in the most fortunate way. There's still that will. Contested, right? The lawyers have filed on it. But do you have the money to pay them? Advice is dear, these days. We might work out a deal."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Is there a chance at all that next year's harvest will be better?"

"If it rains before too long," said Jan, who started seeing sparks that flew in all directions, "I think I can salvage about six, seven

bushels per acre. As things stand now, no more than two bushels per acre. About the same amount it took to seed the land—"

"That's all?"

Jan cleared his throat. "That's all."

"That's peanuts. Peanuts. That's not collateral. You're a cornered man."

Jan's eyes were moist with sweat. He struggled with his tongue. "I'm putting all my cards out on the table. Wheat dropped to thirty cents a bushel, and people think it might drop more—" Huge slabs of concrete kept on dropping off the walls and falling on Jan's head. Each blow caused waves of pain. "I need another year. I need a solid harvest."

"Well. Are you looking for a job? We have an unemployment roster. That might be what you need."

"I am not unemployed. I've never worked for anybody else."

"That is beside the point. Nobody is entitled for assistance who isn't looking for a job. You gotta look. You gotta do your part. Just for the record: You are now case zero-three-three-eight-eight-dash-zero-zero-zero. Funny, huh? Dash-zero-zero-zero?"

"If next year's harvest—"

"Well. That's just guesswork, at this point. Isn't it? Why guess what next year's harvest will be like? Might be as bad as now. These days, we can't depend on guesswork. That's not how it's done." The ruffian started twirling his pencil. "Let's see what we come up with. Let's see what we might do. Now that the old boys' club Republicans are gone, the rules are slightly changed. Now it's the Democrats." He flashed a toothy smile. "The Democrats are foursquare for the unions, mister. They help the little man."

Jan said with great effort: "I'm known to be a prudent man. I might have overtaxed my resources, but I have lived an honorable life. But ever since this dust began to blow—"

"If that rain ever comes," said his tormentor, and started laughing shrilly, "it's gonna rain some mudballs. He-he! Some mudballs. Mudballs! He-he-he. To count on rain is iffy—"

Jan waited for the laugh to die away. He put gnarled fists on the desk, next to the cigar cutter. "You listen hard," said Jan. "You listen hard and pass this on. I want my government to know that I fight hard with everything I have, and if that means that I and farmers like me—"

"The stars and stripes forever, right? Don't give me that baloney. How much do you owe? Altogether?"

"You don't want to know."

"I may not want to know," the Donoghue spoke softly, craning his neck and rubbing his temples, "and you, Jan Neufeld, may not feel like telling me. But now you have to, see?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The lout was chewing on his pencil. "See all these carbon copies? They'll pass through many hands. The county bureaucrats are tough. The state is not much better. And the feds! Let me warn you! The feds! Well, what can I say? They'll all assess your situation from every conceivable angle. They'll all want things specific. They'll want you to unbutton your troubles as a harlot unbuttons her blouse. Details. That's what it's all about. Details."

"What details?"

"The more details about your troubles you can give me right up front, the better off you'll be. Such as: what happened to your previous income?"

"You know there was a fire."

A wide grin, that was all. "I wouldn't know. I wasn't there."

Jan stared out the window. A dog slinked by outside, his back curbed stiff against the wind, its fur so matted with dust it was no longer possible to tell the original color. The agent examined himself in a mirror. Next, he consulted his calendar gravely. He stroked his whiskers thoughtfully. He spoke into the fading day:

"Look. Why not settle our private little business here and now and save ourselves a giant heap of trouble in the courts? Your land belongs to us. Your mother never bought it. It was a temporary lease. I'd like to win you over to my views. I know it

was a sentimental thing with her, that piece of property on which she settled as a pioneer. But she's gone now. It's a new era. The rules are different now. For once, they favor the little guy. Let us see eye to eye—"

The silence started crackling. The leftist shifted in his seat and cast a furtive glance in the direction of the door.

But Jan was Jan, and Jan caught hold of his anger. "For fifty years, she told you no. You wouldn't listen. Or else, you didn't seem to hear. It's still the self-same rules. I am my mother's son. I guard her legacy."

"It's no, then? That's your final word?"

"You got it, buster! No!"

"Do you mind giving me a reason?'

"Because I am an honorable man. Because that land is mine."

"I know that. You know that. But do those guys in Washington know that? Details. Details. That's how the game is played."

"All right. I'll give you some details. For twenty-five years, I was the head of Mennotown. I controlled every Chamber of Commerce event. My folks will back me up politically."

"You think I am some left-wing slicker, huh?"

"I think," said Jan, and faced him squarely, "that you are as unappetizing as a runny egg. That's what I think. What do you think?"

"Here's what I think. You need some help. I'd like to help. Truly I would. But you have got to give me more specifics. How much do you owe? To whom? For how long? What are the repayment conditions? When have your barns been painted last–? "

"Not since the death of Christ."

"Do you have plans to paint them, then? Do you have cash to pay for paint? We need collateral in tip-top shape. Timetables. Regular reports. Give me a date when you will finish giving all your buildings, one by one, a brand new coat of paint."

"That," said Jan Neufeld, "is none of your damn business."

A sheen formed on the lackey's forehead. "But you are wrong. I'm afraid that's how it is. That's how the game is played. You've

got to play it right. And time is running out. You've got to repaint, and you've got to report that you did. Are you willing to put that in writing?"

"There's not a citizen in Mennotown who wouldn't vouch for me."

"I know that. You know that. But do the folks in Washington know that?"

"To hell with Washington," said Jan. The vein on his forehead was swelling. He felt such stabs of searing heat behind the sockets of his eyes that he could barely move his head.

Through a white haze of blinding flashes his tormentor kept talking as though he were a wireless. "Look. Do I make the rules? I don't make the rules. I have to go by them. The rules have changed. He-he. The more details you give me, the better off you'll be. It's helpful if you show the proper attitude. The more details I have, the better I can work this application. Here are the forms. Lay it on thick, and I mean thick! Just lay it on the line. Now that we voted in the Democrats, we know that everybody has a chance, and I mean everybody. Everybody! Paupers have a chance. Drifters have a chance. Even whores and pimps and vagrants have a chance, as long as they are not too proud to put it all on paper. Hey, even union members have a chance. It's not like in the olden days. Not any more, my friend. Here, take these forms, and lay it on the line. Be sure to bear down hard—"

Outside, the wind did not let up. The sun was gone. The trees were coated gray. Jan started struggling with the forms.

"Don't leave out any blanks. A blank will cause a snag—"

"What is the difference," asked Jan slowly, "between hard-up and destitute?"

"Two percent. Two full percentage points. I mean, is that a scream?"

"I see."

"So you would like to qualify? Three thousand bucks? Three-zero-zero-zero? You've gotta be pulling my leg. Let's go back to a previous point. What do you have to offer as security for that

size of a loan?"

"Four thousand bushels of wheat."

"Where?"

"In one of my Hillsboro silos."

"But don't you claim on Line Fourteen that your silo burned down to the ground? That you had no insurance?"

"All in all," said Jan, "I own some fourteen silos. One burned. I still have thirteen left."

"Are all those silos in your name?"

"Of course."

"Rumors about you are flying."

"What rumors?"

"That there might be another fire. If I were you, I'd think that over. Thoroughly. One of my brothers sells insurance. And speaking of collateral—how can you prove the grain is yours? It might be mortgaged also—"

"It is my grain because I say it is my grain. Nobody doubts my word."

"Oh, no?" The lout's desk was so dusty that he left fingerprints on everything he touched. "This town has many blabbermouths."

"You know me," said Jan Neufeld. "Now shut your mouth and let me finish this. My son-in-laws will gladly vouch for me. So will the Hansens and the Penners and the Friesens, and so will Doctorjay—"

"Those bureaucrats. Those bureaucrats. They'll want to verify the dot above the "i". The line across the "t". Everything. Interest. General taxes. Special assessments. Have you tried anywhere else to get consolidation loans? If you want help, you can't conceal your books from the authorities. Just like I said: it's attitude. Let's see. Your liabilities: two mortgages. A hefty loan for farm machinery—never repaid! That debt you owe the blacksmith? Overdue! Back taxes? Due with interest! Small feed and seed loans? My-oh-my! Turned over for collection." He lifted heavy lids. "That's bad. That's terrible. That makes two minuses. The hardware company that let you have spare

tires for those tractors?" The agent suddenly leaned forward. He kept on drumming his fingers. "Well. What about your mother's cows?"

For two seconds, there was a sharp and crackling silence as happens before lightning strikes. Jan turned as pale as though a giant hand had struck him in the temple. When he could speak again, his voice was not his own.

"My mother's cows?"

"That's what this game is all about. To tell the truth, I heard about your mom. I heard she passed away? A shame. A bloody, bloody shame. What was it, now? The gout? She made such wonderful *vareniki*, all smothered in rich cream. I remember her cottage cheese dumplings. I need details about your mother's cows to make a case for you—"

"The details are," said Jan, no longer telling his tormentor but a sadistic universe while struggling through a cloud of helpless woe, "that I am feeding Russian thistles to my departed mother's cows—"

His mother's pride and joy! The herd that sprang from Caroline! And now their bellies sagged, their flanks were hollow, their rib cages showed. Jan heard a small boy's tears in his own voice: "Who'd want to buy my mother's cows?"

"Those cows will have to go. They are considered liquid capital."

"What," asked Jan slowly, "did you say?"

"I said they have to go. Those cows will have to go. They have to go before you qualify. There is no way that you can qualify for government assistance with liquid assets to your name."

"You can't be serious."

"We have to demonstrate," explained the sprightly Socialist to Jan as though here was a choice between the paddle and no supper, "that you are destitute. That you have run your farm into the ground in such a way that you can't get that Barnyard Loan. That you—"

Jan practically shouted. "But that's why I am here. I *want*

that Barnyard Loan! I *need* that Barnyard Loan!"

"— that you don't qualify. We have to demonstrate you are so poor, you are so destitute, that you don't qualify for any kind of loan because we cannot trust you any more that you will pay us back."

"Of course I'll pay you back!"

The leftist kept on dusting the black blizzard from his trousers. "No, no. You still don't get it, mister. Now listen hard and pay attention. That's not why you are here. It's not the Barnyard Loan. You want a grant. That's free money, mister. You want to show the bureaucrats in Washington that you are poor. Too poor to feed your mother's cows. Too poor to feed your family. Too poor to sole your shoes. That is the only way to talk to bureaucrats in Washington these days."

Now it was ax on marrow. "Now wait a minute. Wait a minute. You mean to tell me I haven't suffered yet enough for my elected President, for whom I voted in good faith—?"

"You got it, mister! That's the game. That's how the game is played."

"What are you telling me? Some loafer off the streets would qualify? Some slothful derelict? Some lazy turkey who has never steered a plow? Who does not own a penny? Has never saved a penny? Will never earn a penny?"

"You got that, buddy! Right! They qualify. You don't."

"But I—I built this town! For almost half a century, with my own hands I helped lay out the streets of Mennotown! I cannot get this loan, you say? When every Amos, every Andy can?"

"That's what it all boils down to, yes." The leftist gave a cheeky smile. "Just any local yokel, yes. Not you. Three bucks per application."

# Chapter 75

Jan cut across the vacant lot where Lizzy's sod house used to be. The gate to the corral creaked softly as he pushed it open with his foot.

"There, now," he said, his voice a little slurred. "I did not make the rules. I have to go by them—"

A giggle sat deep in his throat. He knew that it was there; he forced it down; he lost no time in getting down to business. He pulled his gun and started shooting, slowly and methodically. The cows fell, one by one. He took great care to keep the hide intact; it might still be of use.

"The evil out there, larger than the sum of good men's best intentions—" The words came by themselves. He did not know what those words meant, but they were something Josie might have said. She always talked like that. She talked in question marks and riddles.

He scanned the carcasses as though he were scanning the sea. It was as if there was someone standing beside him, and he must explain why he knew that an answer was there; he was soon to

find out; a circle would come to a close.

He lowered his voice to a murmur.

"The Golden Rule," he said, "a trap. A joke. A scream. Why didn't it work out? Who's behind it all?" His throat was filled with bile. The giggle he kept fighting down rose from within as though it were a bubble. "—what do you do when all the walls are coming down? You rise to the occasion!"

That was what Little Melly used to say, her faith in him intact. She stood right next to him, and speaking from the vantage point of her neat, narrow, cramped existence, Little Melly was certainly right. He sensed her presence strongly. She had always been right; she would always be right; and he, who had loved her, had failed her.

How he had missed her loving message was still a mystery to him; that he failed her was no mystery. What was he doing with that insight? Humoring the Eskimos?

Another black blizzard was building. He trembled as though gusts of wind were blowing through his body. "There, now! That's done! I call on heaven to bear witness that the usurers won out—"

He left the still-twitching cadavers lying in the dust, plodding along the deserted dirt road, still giggling to himself at the absurdity of having tried and failed.

He crossed the railroad tracks. He had so loved them as a child because they smelled of tar and speed and progress and adventure—one train on the heels of another. The flashes in his brain lit up with childhood memories—memories like summer lightning.

"See here?" he said, and swept both arms in a wide arc. "See, Missy? What I built?" Where once a whistle stop had been—right at the spot where the old, panting locomotive always had to stop because it had to take in water—his hometown, Mennotown, now grew. "When I came here and started building Mennotown," he giggled to himself, "our government, no larger than a postal station, with just one man to guard the gates—"

He leaned against a spindly tree. He muttered to himself:

"In those good days, we knew where we were going. But now? Nobody knows. Nobody knows. We do not own the government. The hidden hand moves everything—"

He pondered that a bit. It didn't make much sense. The papers claimed the gutters of the White House had not been painted in four years; even the wooden sidewalks had been ripped away and burned. That gave him an odd satisfaction, just knowing that, in his despair, he did not stand alone.

He studied several peeling gutters as though they were the landscape of his life. "I must tell Josie that," he thought. He would ask Josie, too: "Just what went wrong? Between us?" And she would chip away his pride, as she had done before: "You ask? You treated me as though I carried a disease, when all I carried was a mind—"

He stood for a while at the corner of First Street and Main, next to a cardboard shelter. The town hall he had helped to build now looked as ravaged as his heart, as violated as the countryside. The doors were hanging from their hinges.

"Move aside, man! Move aside!" a cyclist yelled rudely, and pushed Jan off the sidewalk.

Jan stepped aside. "Sure. Sure. I'm sorry. I am sorry. I said that I am sorry." He heard himself, astonished. Here were the words that summarized his life: "I am so very sorry." He said them several times to make sure that the humility was there that he had lacked before.

He plodded on. The road was full of chuck holes. Somehow that was symbolic. Tall weeds grew out of cracks. Two taxis waited by the courthouse because there was no gasoline. One of the taxi drivers waved at him. "Hey, mister! Mister! Need a ride to paradise?"

Jan shook his head and kept on walking. "Not now," he said. "Not yet."

From a cheap, crackling radio came snatches of a song. Jan stopped and cocked an ear.

*"Easy come. Easy go-ho-ho-ho—"* Cole Porter, Josie's

favorite. The song brought on a shrieking giggle. "That's it!" he gasped. "That's it! A capital idea!"

He caught himself, steeled his spine and kept on weaving down the road. Night would soon be falling. Shortly, all the windows would be darkened, for Mennotown was short on oil, and now the county's coal supply was running out as well, and with it, electricity.

In a burst of a sudden bravado, he resolved to report to his wife. There was no nonsense about Josie. He would tell her that he had gone ahead, as he had been instructed by his government, and shot his mother's cows so Rarey could attend the artist camp. Perhaps she'd spare a smile.

He knew she would be pleased, though she might want to ply him with her pointed questions, while he would have to struggle telling her the many complicated reasons why it had taken him so long, why he had failed his mother's cows. He would tell her and slap his thighs: "The fat is in the fire! The fat is in the fire!" He hoped for her to praise his caveat. He yearned to have an audience for his story: how he had shot his mother's cows.

But even this was easier said than done.

A homeless man had rolled himself into a blanket and was blocking the door of the telephone booth with his back. Jan stood outside, his face pressed to the pane, and watched him for a while.

He shook his head with disbelief while taking in the man—his toes were coming through his boots; his face and hands were dirty. That gave the vagrant rights he might not otherwise have had? It must be so. He would not leave the booth. This world was upside down. Jan waved at him and shuffled on, forgetting about calling Josie.

He came to rest against a wall where several drifters had started a fire from the debris gleaned from the dried-out river bed. The derelicts sat by the curb, deep in a vitriolic argument.

Jan stopped to help them decide it. His chest had turned into a sea of flames, but could he let this golden opportunity pass by? The hoodlums smelled bad, but he knew they pleased God, for

the humble inherited heaven.

He snapped his fingers to get their attention. "The fat," he said to them, "is in the fire, man. Is that a scream, or what?" This was too good a chance to waste. He was determined to seize it and release what was building within.

"The Socialists and Bolshies," he lectured the astonished derelicts, "have run America aground. Can you deny that fact?"

"Hey, mister! That's right! That's exactly right! If you dig deep enough, somewhere you'll find a Levi—"

"Some of my wife's best friends," said Jan self-righteously, "are Jewish. That is her one small oddity. But otherwise, she's beautiful. My Josie is astonishing—"

One of the younger vagrants winnowed. "Hey, mister! Tell us more!"

"She really is. The biggest charge that can be laid on her is that—" What was it now? Something inside his head was spinning. "Ah, yes! She cannot always tell the difference between a usurer and bankster—"

"Rubbish, your views," belched one of the old, shaggy vagrants. His teeth were rotten stumps. His trousers had a rip. In his lungs was the rattle of death. "Hey, mister! Mister! Ask yourself: is there a country in the world except America that tolerates the Jews? They hand you a free hot dog while skinning you alive."

"But on the other hand—"

The hobo tore the heel off of a piece of bread with dirty hands. "Here. Want to share with me? It's from the food bank, mister."

"Anything but anything," explained Jan to the derelict, now heating to the argument still swimming in some murky depths, "is better than the dole. The dole is not for us. We are the middle class. That's what we have to tell our senators and our congressman. That's my firm opinion. 'We voted you in,' we must say. 'And we can vote you out.' We are the ones that must tell our government: 'This hooligan business must stop.'"

"You want it? Here's a piece. It's barely mildewy."

"No. Thank you. Thank you very much." Jan was glad he

remembered his manners. "I couldn't possibly."

"I serve Socialism. So should you," the vagrant said aggressively.

"A lot of citizens," preached Jan, glad for the willing audience, "agree with you. They feel exactly as you do. Did you, by any chance, vote for this what's-his-name? The last election was crooked—"

The drifter's legs and feet were wrapped in coarse, frayed sacking. He was greedily slurping a brew. It steamed a bit and was brownish. "Crooked? Did you say crooked? What's that supposed to mean? I don't like the look on your face."

"If you will only listen, I'll explain—"

"What's more, I don't like the tone of your voice. Equality for all. Fraternity. And Liberty. That is my motto now. We'll fix this country yet!"

Jan sat down next to him. "Do you value a farmer's opinion?"

"Speak, man! Why not?" The drifter gave a wide, malicious grin.

"Anything, but anything," Jan told him in an august voice, "is better than the dole. That's what I'm trying to tell you."

"Hey, you!" the vagrant elbowed Jan. "Didn't you once belong to the Rotary Club?"

"I did. I did. At testimonial dinners they always honored me—"

"No! You don't say! I used to teach economics. Big joke, that. Huh?" The vagrant started pricking at a blister.

Jan watched as carefully as if watching a complicated operation. He rubbed his hands for emphasis: "That's what you were? An economics prof? Who would have thought? One of those fancy eggheads, right? One of those yahoos with their charts and theories?"

"The thing I resent most about you is your attitude, mister!"

"How dare you speak to me like that? I built this town. I used to awe the neighbors. Stand up and look me in the eye and tell me, man to man—" Jan grabbed him by the belt and started

pulling him but found he had no strength. "Without me, there would be no town. I stood for all improvements. Why do you look at me like that? Nobody doubts my word."

"What is the matter with you, mister? You want to pick a fight?"

"Not really. No. I was just looking for a—"

"—you were just looking for a meal? Right? Just follow the arrow, man. Follow the arrow. Put your pride in your pocket, man! We're all in the same sinking boat. You've got to keep step with the times. Now scat!"

One of the drifters picked up a pebble and hurled it playfully at Jan. Here was a helpless victim, his mind just scrambled eggs.

"Get outta here! Go crawl into the earth!"

The others followed suit and started pelting Jan with little sticks and cones. They were the pack. He was alone. Here was some fun to break the day's monotony.

Jan stood there, not resisting, oblivious to their malice, fair game for any cruelty. He did not tell himself: "Their life is mud and toil and filth and ignorance. Why am I in their company? What have I done? What has gone wrong?" He let abuse rain down on him, his empty gaze fixed on their rags. In the end, they tired of their victim and their game.

"Hearty applause, that was my reward," explained Jan as a parting shot with twisted lips while leaning on the arrow. It pointed to eight words: "Soup kitchen. Address required. One free meal per day."

"That's Dewey's Dole," he told them, helpfully, in case they didn't know.

"That so?"

"Just take my word for it. I know the way," Jan told himself as though he were a stranger who had asked for directions of himself.

Jan kept on trekking on. He still felt dazed and lost. He passed by several neighbors standing in small groups on the cracked sidewalk next to the Janzen store, now boarded up as

well.

"Hey, Jan! Come say hello!" They waved at him, inviting him to join them, but he ignored them haughtily.

They stared after him, fumbling for something to say, when Doctorjay came puffing up the road in his asthmatic flivver.

"*We're older now than we were ye-he-hesterday,*" sang Doctorjay, offkey but with devotion, a one-man sing-along. "*But younger than tomo-ho-rrow—*"

He wore a huge Panama hat that partly blocked his vision, but, just in time, he spotted Jan, right through the pitted windshield—and, in a mirthful mood because of having run across a crony he hadn't seen in years and celebrating the occasion a little bit too lustily, he guessed where his flivver was heading, and almost ran over poor Jan.

"Watch out, you idiot! You! Watch out!"

He recognized Jan just in the nick of time and spun the motorcar around the curb at thirty miles an hour. He brought it to a screeching halt. He jumped out of his seat so he could pound Jan on the shoulder. A cloud of dust arose. The healer slung his arm across Jan's shoulder blades and yelled, a happy man:

"Look what I found! A neighbor! A companion!"

"You're rip-roaring drunk!" scolded Jan and waggled his finger as if he were Dewey.

"Forgive the aroma!" yelped Doctorjay. "That skunk had unfortunate timing. I plowed right over his tail. What a mess! What a stench! Old pal, you wanna take a ride to Wichita? I'm warning you. If you sit next to me, we'll both be stinking to high Heaven. What's one more skunk, right? More or less? Say, did you hear the latest joke about two skunks in competition with a flivver?"

"No."

"Well, then?"

"What?"

"Well, can I tell that joke to you?"

"Of course. Of course."

Oh, jeez. Now I forgot the punch line." Doctorjay looked at

Jan sideways and fell silent.

Before long, a dilemma arose. It was still early afternoon, but Doctorjay had tanked up on sufficient fire water so that the patriotic songs, never far away, now bubbled strongly to the fore. It was no fun to sing alone when one had company.

That was the reason Doctorjay took his huge foot off the gas pedal, pulled to the side, and peered at Jan suspiciously.

Jan's face was as gray as the sky.

*"Onward! Onward, Christian Soldiers!"* hummed the healer, unable to resist.

Jan smiled a shaky smile. "I'm just not in the mood." He shook his head and swallowed. The invisible fire was eating its way through his veins.

Doctorjay put out a clumsy feeler: "Cat's got your tongue, Jan? Anything wrong? Don't be a pessimist. It's just one bank. One measly bank. You're a man of reputation. You can go someplace else."

"How did you know," asked Jan, now snapping sharply to attention, "that I just paid a visit to the bank?"

This was not one of Doctorjay's perceptive days. He was too busy struggling with the songs that kept on leaping to his tongue. "You know this town. Word gets around."

"It does?"

"Well, don't you know we have a lot of blabbermouths?" belched Doctorjay, who knew no inhibition.

Jan's voice was murderous. "What do they say?"

"Cheer up, old chap. Cheer up! Admit defeat for once. What do the neighbors say? They say your credit is exhausted. Whose fault is that? Your own. Who chaired the Hoover-for-President-Club? You! Didn't you? Where was your judgment, man? In Hoover we trusted. Now we're busted. Say, Jan. What's that? What's bulging from your pocket?"

"That," said Jan Neufeld, "is a gun."

Something sat grinning between them. It sobered Doctorjay enough. He cleared his throat. "You wouldn't be so foolish,

would you? You aren't courting nonsense, are you?"

"I just picked off my mother's cows."

"You did? What made you do that, Jan?"

"Well, as the song goes," Jan told his old friend, facing him, "Easy come and easy go."

"I bet you anything," cried Doctorjay, now rallying through fog, "that next week will be better. Next week will bring strong rain. July will break the drought. I smell the clouds already! Remember all those bumper crops? Your name will go down yet in Kansas history. . . "

"I worked for history," said Jan. "For more than half a century, I worked, believing I was making history. I tried to build a decent town where I could raise my children. I worked until I thought my arms were going to drop off—"

"I bet you my last quarter you will have wealth again with a Capital W. Come fall, your land will be bursting with kernels." A sly triumph sat suddenly in Doctorjay's red eyes. "Say, buddy! Listen! Listen! If I were you, you know what I would do? I'd go and try a limber shot of liquor—"

He put an old friend's hand right on Jan's knotty nape. He started rubbing with his thumb to soothe a hurting muscle. He practically moved himself to tears with sympathy.

"Look, now's the time. Old buddy, now's the time! I know the perfect hole. I have a nose for parlors. That stuff is balmy on the brain. There's nothing like it, Jan! What are we waiting for? Look, I won't snitch on you. Noralee would kill me from her grave, and Abigail will, too. She'll be wild is what she'll be! And Josie? Why, she'll be madder than a March hare!"

"If Josie only—"

"Right. Right, Well, never mind her. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. That's what I always say. Just try it, buddy, will you? It will do wonders for your spirit. Wonders! It'll take the edge off any worry. Just take my word for it—"

Doctorjay was snoring softly with his head next to his tumbler. Jan still sat straight, although the ceiling swayed.

"Look, Daddy," said the man behind the counter carefully. "This guy here? He's had it. He's snookered. Thoroughly. Did he come in with you? It's almost midnight now. I think I better call a cab—"

"This is my lifelong friend!"

"No! You don't say? This old lush here? Say! Aren't you the leader of the Hallelujah crowd?"

Jan slammed his fist so hard that all the glasses rattled. "Ha-ah! That's me! I'll have another serving of your giggly water."

"I thought so! See? I thought so! I knew you the moment you and your buddy here weaved in. Look, mister! Here's the door. I don't need your kinda trouble. Be good, now. Be nice. Take this old chap here by the collar and get him off my premises. Why don't you leave now? Right now? I don't need the police. Spare me your kinda trouble—!"

"I said," roared Jan, " that I want yet another drink! I want another drink this minute!"

"Give me that gun. I said give me that gun!"

"That is my gun! You can't have my gun!"

"There now. There now. You want to sit on it? Go right ahead and sit on it. Just you be sure it doesn't make an extra hole where you don't need it, right? Say, mister. Is this the first time that you ever had a drink? Are you a teetotaler? That's what your buddy claimed. He's always bragged he'd win that bet. He didn't make that up, did he?"

Jan snickered to himself. "He won it, and I lost. I lost. I lost."

"Naw! Shucks! Come on! It can't be all that bad."

"For fifty years he badgered me," Jan whined in a small voice. "He badgered me and badgered me, but I held out! I never once gave in! I had strong principles. Can you believe it? Fifty years? I mean, is that a scream? You don't believe me? Why do you look so skeptical? I don't like that smirk on your face."

"I believe you. Mister, I believe you. Sure. Why not? Anything you say."

"Then why—why are you looking at me like that?"

The man behind the counter took Jan firmly by the sleeve. "It's time to call it a night. Just leave, I said. Leave by the side door, will you? I'll try to sober up your friend on my old couch."

"I wanna sing," shouted the bonesetter, reviving suddenly. "You wanna sing with me?"

"Sure," said Jan, slurred, and tried to put his arm around his shoulders. "This is my friend. Don't anybody touch my friend."

"Just one more song," decided Doctorjay. "*I get a kick out of you—hoo—hoo—hoo!*"

"What a fine song!" shouted Jan. "Say that again? Again?"

"*I get a kick out of you—hoo-hoo—*" Doctorjay started sobbing, totally drunk, head rolling on his shoulder. "I wanna die. Why don't you let me die?"

The bartender, taking Jan's elbow, tried steering him out the door.

"See that hotel across the street? Ten stories high? Maybe they'll let you sleep it off. Just tell them who you are. Tell them you come from Mennotown. That name's still good for a few miles. Maybe they'll give you credit. Just don't fall out the window, mister—"

Dewey was just about ready to close out his bean-and-celery day when he looked up and saw Jan standing in the door, barefoot and muddy, head to toe, both shoes on a stick slung over his shoulder.

"Jan," Dewey cried, "what are you doing here this late? Did Josie chase you away with a broom?"

"Just visiting. Just visiting." A mad gleam lodged in Jan's left eye; the right was closed and turning purplish.

"Here, have a cup of good, strong coffee," shouted Dewey as if Jan couldn't hear. "Come in. Come in. Sit down. I heard the bankster turned you down? That's a shame, Jan. What a shame. Watch out! That coffee cup is hot!"

"Who told you that the bankster turned me down?"

"Word gets around," said Dewey loftily. "There! Did you burn yourself?" Dewey flared his nostrils expertly and sniffed.

"Say, isn't that the giggly water that I smell? Jan? Jan, you didn't! What will the deacons say? Here, let me help you. Sit down. I said sit down! Here's a hot bowl of soup for you. I'm just about ready to call it a day. We close at midnight now, what with the added numbers. Say! Isn't that fantastic soup? Just go ahead. Here. Be my guest. Let me put something healthy in your stomach for a change—"

Jan fell into a rhythmic chant. "Fan-tas-tic soup. Fan-tas-tic soup."

"That's Little Melly's recipe," said Dewey pointedly. "Thanks to her recipes, I get excellent press for my work. Oh, that reminds me. That reminds me. There is a fellow from the *Eagle* still fixing to come by—"

Jan started spooning soup. Curtains of cobwebs, thick with dust, were hanging from the ceiling. Between spoonfuls he managed to say: "Can I just hang around a bit? I can't go home like this. I think I am a little soused—"

"That's putting it politely."

"Don't tell my wife. Do me a favor, will you? I can't face going home. Say, this old cup of soup is really, really excellent—"

"Say what you will about the Democrats. They don't skimp on the vegetables."

"You can say that again."

"See that odd fellow over there?" whispered Dewey. "Just yesterday, the richest man in Hillsboro. And now? Not one red penny to his name. That's earthly vanity for you. You draw your own conclusions."

"You're right. That's earthly vanity—"

"I still remember him. A cheapskate. A real cheapskate. Had all those silver dollars stacked away, but stingy with the hat. No ten percenter, he. Not even five percent. And now? Just look at him. See how the Lord will force humility? Jan, are you sure you are okay? You want another ladle? Here, let me have that bowl. I'll fill it up again—"

"I'm fine," said Jan. He forced down waves of nausea. "I

beg of you. Don't tell my wife. She'll draw the wrong conclusions."

"She always does. She has her theories."

"I don't quite know what happened. I think my cold forced me to look for warmth. That's why I tried the giggly juice—"

"A cold," lectured Dewey, not one to miss an opportunity to steer a sinner right, "can turn into pneumonia. And pretty soon to death. A terrible disease. Take dust pneumonia—"

Jan's tongue had turned into a snake. It reared its head and hissed: "Shut up! Shut-up-shut-up-shut-up!"

This outburst startled Dewey Epp. "Compose yourself! Compose yourself!"

Jan all but shrieked. "Shut-up-shut-up-shut-up! Shut up! Shut up about my mother. Shut up about my mother's cows—"

The feeding hall was crowded still with beggars. Three or four craned their necks. They pressed close on the steps and outside and watched as Dewey pulled his lower lip into a pout and started blowing steam as though he were a locomotive.

"Well, pardon me! Pardon me if I managed to step on your bunions! What did I say to make you mad? I didn't say a word! You lost your bet? Is that what's eating you? Some people never learn. Well, sober up. Admit defeat for once. You lost! Now take it like a man. Would you mind giving me a hand? Here's a broom. Just start with the entrance. You think this is a picnic? It's hard to feed these bums! Hard work, the credit always be the Lord's! But they're learning, man. They're learning. They're learning to take themselves to their Savior for comfort. See that latch over there? Just push it shut, will you? It's time to call it a day. My hemorrhoids are killing me. Man! Have you ever seen a dirtier place? Just sweep behind those barrels, will you? There! Thank you! Thank you very much! That ought to do it for now! Let's call it a day. The Lord will find a way. Why be a worrywart? Stop worrying! Things will pick up. Now that we voted in the Roosevelts, they'll fix the business cycle. They'll stabilize the currency. There now! That ought to do it for today. Except for the lists. We still have to finish the lists. I've got to keep those

lists, you understand? Account for every penny? You know how it is. You know what those bureaucrats are like. They always want details. This eligibility business is tough. They want accounting in quadruplicate. Oh, hi there! Hi there! Come on in! Come in! I didn't think you'd make it—"

A reporter stood in the door. "I'm looking for a guy named Dewey Epp. Epp as in E-pee-pee."

"That's me!" laughed Dewey. "Hey! Say! Is that a rhyme? Is that a rhyme? Ee-pee-pee!"

"Too late to take some pictures?" the young reporter asked.

"No. Jan, do you mind?" The preacher fished a pencil from his apron. "Here. Put your name right on this line. Right on the dotted line, I said just put your Friedrich Wilhelm there! Those bureaucrats are tough. They'll all want things specific. There's nothing like good press. It keeps the nickels raining—"

"Just what exactly," said Jan slowly, "are you saying, Dewey Ee-pee-pee?"

"Well," pouted Dewey, much annoyed. "You had your bowl of soup at government expense. Did you, or did you not?"

Jan forced the words. "You don't mean that! You don't!"

"Well, Mr. High-and-Mighty!" cried Dewey, piqued, and blew his allergies with vigor into a flowered handkerchief that Little Melly had embroidered recently, without an inch of wasted thread. "If you don't like my way, why don't you take your handouts from the Methodists and Presbyt—?"

That's when Jan's heart exploded. That's when the bullet flew.

# Chapter 76

The jail guard blew his nose by using thumb and index finger. He smelled of soap suds and wet rags.

"Say! Is it true you shot a preacher? To tell the truth, I've often felt like doing that myself. The stuff they lay on you is drivel, nothing else—that's what I always say!"

"What day is it?" asked Jan, and put trembling fingers to his brow. His body ached all over, but every shred of memory was gone.

The guard gave Jan a little shove. "What day? You mean what date? Say, mister: are you daft?" His daily arrestees were barefoot vagrants who merited no more reflection than an unpleasant epidemic of fleas, but this arrest was different; it jolted him agreeably. "It's August first, man. August first. What did the preacher do that made you mad enough to pull a gun on him?"

Jan had the odd sensation that he addressed an audience to whom he must account. "He said to me: 'Here's the abacus. Now go ahead. Compute the measure of your losses.'"

"Come on. Move—will you? This ain't the Hilton, mister!" The guard wiped his nose on the sleeve of his shirt. "Move along,

now, mister. Move along—"

"—the measure of your losses. And when I did, he climbed up on a chair to get a better view."

The guard gave out a hearty snort. "That's how they are. That's how they roll their nuts, if you know what I mean. By voyeuring your misery. You got a family?"

Jan shook his head. "Not any more." The air was stifling hot; the sky above was ink.

"Now drop your pants. At your age, no need to be squeamish. Here, raise your arms. It's just some powerful insecticide. Just as I said—this ain't the Hilton, but, on the other hand—man, listen! Chin up! It isn't all that bad—"

While Jan stood, shivering, obeying, the guard was prattling on.

"At least you got some shelter at Uncle Sam's expense. At least you'll get three meals. I know some folks who get themselves in trouble just for a place to sleep. Well. As they say. Here! Let me help you, mister. You look as though somebody said about you: There stands the cad who has betrayed us all!"

Jan flinched as though he'd been hit. "What did you say? How can you tell?"

"Just guessing, man. Just guessing." He steered Jan by the elbow. "This way to the hellhole, if you'll pardon my French."

Jan steadied himself as he moved. Along both sides of the narrow corridor ran a thick platform with a rail; he saw a rusty washing trough built into a niche in the wall. He stopped and said apologetically: "If you don't mind, let me just wash my hands—"

"No time for dawdling, mister—"

The key turned twice. Then it was dark. Jan leaned exhaustedly against the wall; it was warm as an oven and sticky with moisture. A light bulb swayed forlornly.

"Could I please have a glass of clean, cold water?"

"Less fluid, less need to empty the bucket," the guard spoke through the slit and sauntered down the hall.

Jan sat on the cot for a while, a numb and patient pauper. A

pail without a lid sat prominently in the corner, smeared at the edges with dried excrement. A small, grilled window to his right outlined a sky without a single star.

"Here," said the guard, returning. "I changed my mind. It isn't much. It's just a bite. A piece of turkey and some bread. Look, try to get some solids in your stomach, mister—"

"I'm not that hungry. I'm just cold."

"Sober up, man! Sober up! You might as well put something in your stomach."

Jan wrapped himself in the thin blanket that lay at the foot of his cot. The prison guard watched for a while. "Are you nuts? It's stifling hot outside—"

"It is?" Jan kept trembling as though stricken by violent fever.

"Dog days of August, man! Dog days of August!" The guard felt a surge of pity. He was fishing for something to say.

"Hey. Let me cheer you up," he said at length and scratched himself with gusto. "You need some cheering up? You want to hear the latest? They say the picture of a girl in a white hat jumped from the wireless straight up into the inside of a plane. Can you believe a thing like that? I'm telling you. That's progress. Progress with a capital P—"

As if resisting an unwelcome current, Jan clung to the frame of his cot. Some unseen, growing force seemed to be pulling him into a black and swirling hole. He said in a barely audible voice: "I no longer belong. I want the good old days. I want no part of progress."

Even before the break of dawn, Doctorjay turned up at the jail house, parting the air with his powerful fists. In tow were Jan's six daughters' husbands, four neighbors with dangling suspenders, two relatives from Oklahoma, young Rarey, and Mennotown's three councilmen.

The group surrounded Jan, who stood defenseless and bewildered. No one knew what to say.

Doctorjay kept clearing his throat and finally said, in a voice choked with woe: "Will you ever forgive an old donkey like me?"

Huge tears were welling up in Rarey. "I've broken all my brushes. I've been a pampered baby for too long."

Jan's sons-in-law pressed closer, creating a protective wall. "Dad! Don't you worry. Don't you worry. The neighbors all came running! We've put up every penny of your bail. It's all arranged already—"

The Oklahomans lied: "We've come into some windfall money. We'll pay the bond. We'll put you up in the hotel, with just one guard outside."

The councilmen spoke in one voice: "You'll be alone. No one to bother you. Your lawyer is already on his way—"

Jan stood, ringed by his relatives and friends, and said when he could speak again: "I want a top floor room."

The congregation, gray with sorrow, buried both—the Preacher Dewey first, and then Jan Neufeld, the man who founded Mennotown, a sorry suicide.

A sackful of tears for the preacher, and for Jan Neufeld this: a hushed, apologetic eulogy delivered by a Unitarian. The dead man had been popular, but even so, it proved impossible to find a willing Elder. The town was in deep shock—but still: a suicide was a suicide and could not properly be called by any other name. It was a shock that rocked them like an earthquake. There was no way to summarize the depths of the disaster until the Lord spoke up.

He spoke to His people with howling and whistling and thunder and lightning and buckets of raindrops that lasted a day and a night. When finally the Lord fell silent, the dust bowl was gone. The earth would renew. The terror had come to an end. While Doctorjay still fended off reporters, the black winds slackened and diminished. Horizon to horizon, the sky turned soft and smooth. The roofs of Mennotown lay glittering once more. The rivers overflowed. They say that not a trace of dust remained in

all the state of Kansas.

The rains brought such relief that for three days the stars and stripes snapped in the breeze in gratitude, and somewhere in the distance, a radio blared to passersby that happy days were here again. Again.

As the faithful gathered in the church that Jan had built for Dewey Epp, Mennotown lay flush against the earth, awash in blinding sunlight, the first time in three years. It was a sparkling day. The long-expected miracle had happened: a soft and gentle rain had silenced the tornadoes and made the brown earth willing to accept Jan's loyal, broken bones.

The people watched the rain and knew the Lord wept over Jan, as He wept over Dewey, and now they felt that they could, too—weep over both, with equal grief. And weep they did, and that felt good. When finally the rain was spent, when all the tears had fallen, the clouds outside looked fluffed like Lizzy's legendary feather beds. The sky was very blue, and smelling like clean laundry. The boiling haze was gone.

"Let us not judge but understand," the Unitarian now intoned while standing on paper-thin soles, uncertain of heaven and hell. "For only as we understand our fellow man, can we be understood—"

He pulled out a poem and told them of things that were not of this earth, while the mourners kept dabbing tears from their eyes and casting cold glances at Josie.

The sanctuary was packed, but all hung back, preferring the rear pews. No one was willing to sit next to Josephine, whose husband had seen fit to hurl his broken heart past seven rows of blind, cracked windows, down to the sidewalk, with a thud.

The papers, busy with the tragedy, had claimed, in smarmy words, that chances were the giggle juice had pulled the trigger, that the Depression was at fault. There was no doubt: She knew a deeper truth. She was dressed in her suffragette yellow.

Prying eyes were rifling Josie's face, but she paid no atten-

tion. It was as if her husband's death had let her lean her cheek against a slab of marble to feel its smoothness and its strength. It was as though she, too, had knelt beside a crystal spring and washed the night from her red eyes. She looked as though, once blinded, now she saw.

"Suffering is like a filter," the Unitarian proffered next. "It purifies all thought—" He started speaking gently of the glory of a sunset and the stillness of the night. As many mourners yesterday had listened and heard the eulogy for Dewey, so now they did for Jan: in fact, subtract the third and fourth rows where the progressives perched, stiff with self-consciousness, their glances in their laps, subtract the differences in sermons, the mourners were the same.

And yet, the universe had split apart, revealing the abyss.

All eyes were glued on Josie. She looked like a bird that had stared down the mouth of a cannon. She sat there, a slim, ramrod woman, erect in the very first row, and to her left sat Rarey.

She held the youngster's hand. Now and then she whispered something in his ear that made him struggle even harder against the tears. Behind them, two rows of the pews were completely empty. Her closest relatives sat in the third. But she was not alone, for to her right sat Doctorjay whose face was almost purple, and he was staring straight ahead.

He sat as close to Josephine as he could scoot inside a church and not risk snickers for his boldness. The mourners, like a wall, had drawn aside as he stalked in, now sobered to his bones. He paid nobody heed. He plunked himself right next to Josephine, and there he sat, and there he stayed. The congregation blanched.

At intervals, the widow turned full face to him and smiled a grateful smile. Her wonted wealth of words had flown from her bold tongue. She sat upright, as though at attention, as if her ear were cocked.

The impact of the shock had altered Josie's face. The mourners clearly saw the grief and rue and anguish in that well-cut, aging profile, the total disbelief. She was bracing herself for what now was to come. You could tell: she had finally used up

her luck.

"He was much loved, and will be missed," the Unitarian said, and Little Melly, well-practiced when it came to shedding tears, at that point started leaking. Her parched heart, too; it counted, too; it cried out for some heartfelt release. She watched the widow through the tears that kept on welling up beneath her lowered lashes. She fumbled for her handkerchief. This was as sweet as honey, as bitter as quinine. She took her time to savor every nuance. There was no special hurry. Dewey was no longer there to shake a warning finger, but that Josie's punishment was overdue was very clear to Little Melly as well as everybody else.

The spinster had gone to her knees to seek guidance the previous night, and now she sat and waited. And to herself she said: "Her measure has run out."

Little Melly was as drained as any bride at last allowed to leave the wedding bed. She sat in the next-to-last row. She had helped bury Dewey, whom she had raised, her junior by seven years, and she had wept for him, adding her share to all these heaving sobs around his open casket, up front and in full view.

Jan's casket stood alone. Laid out in splendor, true!—but closed.

"Give us the strength to accept the things we cannot change—" the Unitarian said, passing the Good Book by and claiming, merely sideways, that Jesus was a noble man and Jan's beloved model, without admitting even once: He was the one and only Savior without whom life and death lost all design. All Unitarians were like that.

As Little Melly sat and listened to the garbled message, she slowly grasped at last what she had struggled all along to comprehend: it took a tragedy of this enormity for Josie to come to her senses, and thus, in a round-about way, prove Little Melly right.

"—to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference," the Unitarian preacher sorrowed. "Let the bow in the Archer's hands be for gladness, for as He loves the arrow that flies—"

The spinster's face jerked violently at the assault of unaccustomed thought. Her flitting glances settled on the healer's checkered tie which seemed to strangle him, restricting his Adam's apple. It hopped around in protest as though it danced the jitterbug. His bushy eyebrows bounced.

"That's Doctorjay," thought Little Melly, with such a surge of gall she briefly lost her place within her prayer book. "He can't leave well enough alone! Not even now. He's always been her champion. Why can't he, just for once—?"

And it was true. It was unbearable. The bonesetter looked desperately ill-at-ease as if a fly were sitting on his nose, and yet he showed resolve. There was a somber will. There was such fury in his face that it made Abigail, who sat with several of her own far in the back, chew on her lower lip and fumble with her collar.

The healer didn't move. He sat there, next to Josie, and Little Melly sensed he had the constitution of a bull. It was so quiet in the church a fly could just have zipped around and landed anywhere. She saw it very clearly; she was that overwrought. She longed to swat it with her prayer book. There was no fly, of course; her mind imagined it. The rain had washed them into the gutters. She wanted to reach out and smack it hard and cause a small explosion, to ease the tension in the church the Unitarian had brought on, but she sat rooted to her pew.

"—so He loves also the bow that is stable."

Little Melly's bosom started heaving with emotion. Finally! Oh, finally! The focus was on Him. Up to this point, she wasn't even sure if those were Gospel words or someone's watered-down opinion.

"Let us now sing," suggested Archibald, and rose out of his pew. The Unitarian was wrapping up, and Archie took his place to fill in for his father and give Jan his good-bye.

"All right. All right. That's it!" He gave the Unitarian a helpful nudge right down the steps and launched himself into protracted amens. His good eye was glassy and cold, like a bird's. His bad eye was swollen and closed.

There was a moment's silence, and then the faithful rose and started filing past Jan's casket, while Archibald commenced to sing:

*"Von der Eh-he-herde reiß mich los,*
*mache mei-hei-heinen Glauben groß—"*

The congregation joined obligingly, the service drawing to its close. It was a fitting song to close a funeral, expressing keen emotions. The relatives kept rubbing at their eyes, and Little Melly knew: that tested song contained enough bad memories to hurt Jan's widow like the blazes.

Out in the sunshine, Josie stood, alone. The faces around her were wooden. The papers to foreclose the homestead were now on file in court. Jan had been king on Appian Way . Now he was dead. All earthly power was in vain. His kingdom would be blown to bits. You could already sense it: the Donoghues were fingering their cash.

The banker now stepped forward. He told the widow, as they stood upon the steps of Dewey's church that Jan had built in better days when money still was plentiful: "My patience has run out." He told her, loud enough so that the farthest row inside could hear: "A week. That's all that I can give you. Believe me. The matter is out of my hands. Here is your carbon copy."

Her voice was cold and even: "You do what you must do."

"The paperwork alone is eating up our profit. If I were you, I wouldn't count on anything. This week alone, the bank has had nine foreclosures. "

"She has one friend. That's me," said Doctorjay, now stepping up, his eyes two narrow slits.

"You've got to have the money, buddy," said the banker. He clasped both hands in front of him as though he were a priest reciting litanies: "Cash, man! That's where it's at. Jan Neufeld was indebted to the hilt. Three lifetimes wouldn't be enough to repay all the money he borrowed. You've got to have the cash. To pay the bank. To pay back taxes. To pay redemption fees."

The folks exchanged grave looks. If glances could have

murdered, that banker would have had ten thousand arrows in his back.

"There's no free wool with which to make your breeches," the banker said, and turned to throw his parting shot right over his left shoulder. "Don't expect any favors from me."

All through the night, Josie hunched over unpaid bills by the light of the kerosene lamp, for the utility had sent a man to cut off electricity. She worked with concentration. Now dawn was breaking gently. The sky was coloring slowly. It would be a sun-flooded day.

Rarey huddled at her feet, clad in his striped pajamas. He never left her side. His mind was spinning with fatigue, but he refused the couch.

She bent to him. Her heart just melted at his sight—his tousled hair, his narrow shoulders. She wrapped both arms around him; he buried his face in her lap. Both sat in the parlor in silence.

At long last, Josie said: "No matter where I look, it's like curing one illness with the help of five doctors. If I rob Peter to pay Paul—"

"We'll find a way," said her young son. "I don't need private lessons."

"No, darling. No. I'd like for us to leave. If we stay here, you will have to shoulder a load that belongs on the back of a man. The bankster and the Donoghues will put us out of business."

"We'll manage, Mom. We're family."

"I don't think so," said Josie.

In the slow-breaking dawn, the twelve-year-old looked up. He was so pale he was translucent. "I'll take a paper route—"

She could not help herself; the words kept spilling out: "What did I ever want of life? I wanted for your paintings to be as colorful as anemones. How could that have been wrong?"

His head lay on her knees, his arms were wrapped around her tired body. He lifted a determined chin.

"There's Doctorjay. He said he'd find a way—"

"He's a good friend, but he's not a sorcerer. He'd help us if he could, but Doctorjay has not an extra penny to his name. His fortunes, too, are shattered. And now there's Abigail. He's thrown in his lot with Abigail."

"Don't worry, Mom. Please, Mom. Don't cry because—"

"I am not crying, darling. My tears fell years ago."

She filled her lungs with morning air, and something deep within stopped trembling.

"I'm looking at realities. No matter where I look, I can't see a way out. I cannot keep the farm. Let's focus on your talent, Rarey. Let's leave with heads held high. Thank God that your sisters are grown. They don't need me. They never did. They have their husbands, their families, their embroidery and their *vareniki.* It will be you and me and your fine talent, Rarey. I knew from the beginning you were special. I will let nothing, no one steal your talent. You are bright; you confounded the Mennotown teachers."

"But, Mom—"

"Here's what I see: I can try to rescue your farm, or I can try to rescue your talent. I cannot do both. I don't have the strength to do both. I have to decide. I want you to help me decide. I'm not an alchemist. I can't work miracles. I am no longer young. Were I still young, it would be different. But I—I missed so much. I should have learned to run a farm, to run a business. I asked to learn. Right up until the eve of bankruptcy I begged your father daily—"

A lifetime filled with offering her gifts to hostile minds and hearts! She caught herself and swallowed down what crowded on her tongue. Instead she said:

"The Donoghues will get the farm. That has already been decided. There's nothing we can do. They'll get a grant. They have their fingers in the nation's kitty." She steeled herself. "The best that I can hope for is for a little pocket cash. If we sell everything, we can repay our bills. We'll walk away with honor. We'll walk with heads held high. Let's cut our losses, Rarey. It's

better late than never. We'll find another home. We'll go to California."

Her young son's body clung to her as though he were a burr. "We can't do that."

"Ah, but we can. We can. That's what I'm telling you." To the ends of the earth she would go! The words spilled from a well she had dammed for so long she had forgotten how her feelings could rush, surge, sing, shout with wonderful release. "It's not about today! It's not about tomorrow! It started years ago. And all because my heart was speaking in a language all its own!"

It now was almost day; she didn't even notice; she turned up the wick; she poured herself into her young son's eyes, for it was now or never. The shackles of a lifetime fell away. "Had I not grown, I would have fit in nicely. But I grew. I wasn't a man, but I grew. I kept searching for meaning, for knowledge. Your father did not die a torn or broken man because of me. And not because of you, my darling. Don't ever think that it was you. Don't ever for a moment think it was because he could not pay your lessons. He didn't even die because he ended on the dole. Not even that! He died because he overstepped his boundaries. He fell in love with me and stepped out of the herd." She filled the last cell of her lungs with air and said: "He loved me! And so what! Fools love. But intelligent people admire."

Her son was staring at her now, unblinking, but she had more to say.

"That's what it's all about. Respect. Not love. Respect. And admiration! You have two choices with the herd: you're either brutalized, or else you learn to brutalize. Chiefly, you brutalize yourself. Listen! I wish you were older, but I can't hold back. Your father and I were young once. We weren't married then, but we were very much in love. Your father held me in his arms, and I was shimmering with life. I had no choice. I said: Yes. Yes. The wind kept on ruffling his sheaves—"

The years fell away. She was fifteen again, and there was molten lava in her body.

"My feelings for your father on that day were deep and strong

and true. I thought that I was beautiful. I longed for admiration. I longed to lose myself. Of that, there came a child. A little boy. A little miracle. I loved him so. But they had only darts. Their poisoned darts flew every which way, and some of them went deep. Some went so deep that they became a part of me, a scarred and poisoned part of me, and by and by, I lost my radiance—"

"My father—"

"Your father? Your father? I could have been his, for the asking. I was there, in the palm of his hands. At first, he just laughed. But soon he stopped laughing. The herd made him stop. At our wedding, I couldn't wear white, for the clan kept on scolding: 'Black sin. Oh, black sin.' The deacons? They couldn't forgive and forget. And soon he couldn't either."

She stared into the sunrise, but all was not yet said.

"I wanted good things for that child. History. Geography. Music. Sculpture. I even asked for algebra—"

When she could speak again, she told her last-born quietly: "He was your brother, Rarey. He died in a freak accident. The child conceived in love became an icicle. And people said: 'That's punishment! You brought it on yourself!'"

She sat there in the glare of golden morning rays and could not stop herself:

"From porch to porch, the rumors flew, and when I needed comfort, I got just poisoned darts. Just darts. Just vicious, poisoned darts. No matter what I did, his people said: 'Poor Jan. He's hooked. She has the devil in her eyes.' There is no compromise in Mennotown. There is no middle way. They are no better than the worst of cannibals. They will devour their own. Look at that sunrise, darling. You wonder who has made that sun. They say the Lord. The Lord. The Lord. And yet, that kind of sunrise leaves them cold! Don't ever count on Him. Their Lord feeds on their cookie-cutter natures. Unless you have that cookie-cutter nature, too, He won't be on your side. Is there a loving God? Hah! What a joke! What a sick joke their preachers have dreamed up. I was forever after grubbing through the rubble."

"My father—"

"Your father was a pious man. Nobody argues with that. He lived a decent life. At least he tried! He tried! But look at what he missed. How he missed out on life! And when his farm goes on the block, tomorrow, and you're left without a penny, you watch and learn your lesson." It ran through her mind like a nightmare. She knew that, tomorrow, the headlines would holler. She turned to Rarey fully: "I'll do what you wish, but I know what I want. And here's what I want—"

She cupped his young face with warm hands and spoke clearly:

"—I want you to learn to sketch better and better. I want you to bring home a girl with black curls. I want you to add to your life huge splashes of color. I want you to plump up your heart with strong dreams. I want you to choose your own friends. I want you to think your own thoughts. I don't want to see you with the herd, the Deweys and the Archies and their ilk—"

"Maybe no one will come tomorrow," said Rarey, choked, a helpless child.

"Just never fear," his mother said. "You have a day to think it over. But mark my word. Just mark my word. They'll come. The smell of blood will travel with the current."

# Chapter 77

All hope was riding on the healer. Those who knew Doctorjay were sure he would send every scoundrel packing if he had to forge hard money from thin air. He was the only man to put the bankers out of business, make mincemeat out of them. A showdown was expected, the likes of which made even Archie's glass eye gleam, and everyone was fixing to be there.

A farm auction was an occasion; it always drew crowds. Jan's farm, defenseless on the auction block, was an event few people who could travel would have missed.

Now all the relatives were gathering in groups where they indulged in soggy, emotional reunions. Some had drawn up long lists of things they thought they could afford; they shared them, comparing motley items. Even those who had no money whatsoever to spend on windfall bargains had come out of curiosity, taking it all in.

Prospective bidders for farm machinery arrived in buggies from as far away as Hillsboro. Excited lookers-on spilled out of tattered flivvers and gathered on the lawn. Two chartered buses came from Wichita, and people had to push and shove to find a

place where they could watch the action. The lawn was black with visitors, fingering this item, then that, pulling watches from their pockets as if they couldn't wait, greeting one another with trembling hugs and kisses as if the shock of Jan's demise had made them into long-lost friends, finding comfort on each other's shoulders. Fence to fence and gate to gate, the people kept milling about. Even a Catholic priest had arrived in a black cylindrical hat, and now was sifting through Jan's recreational items, chiefly his fish lines and hooks.

Careful cash customers, all!

"Let's see now what we have here," announced the auctioneer, launching a warm-up exercise. "All right, now! Folks! Move closer, fellows! Ladies! Closer! Let's let the community spirit run high!"

The throng solidified. People moved elbow to elbow.

"We want to send Jan's little lad through college, right? Let's not be stingy now. What have we got here? Look at this! Two duckfoot cultivators. A rotary rod weeder. Three harrows in excellent shape except for this one little—"

At that moment, Josie stepped out of the house. The dog started growling, just hearing her step. She knew that the neighbors stood ready to take her apart; she kicked a footstool hard and sprained a toe and didn't even flinch. She still had the devil in her. She wore her sparklers in both ears. She carried a large chunk of chalk and started marking items.

She marked them, one by one, to set the proper floor. Her eyes were wide open, unblinking. A nickel here. A quarter there. She moved with surety, as though she still were in her prosperous days, replete with parasol. Pride and vanity had ruled her since she came to Mennotown, and now she let them know: no law can make me stay!

Why give her enemies a pat?

She knew there was no mercy. The people she had fought since she could think and speak—as was her wont, all metaphors and similes—would carry everything away: the stove with its embossed nickel trimmings, the staggered kettles, sifters, fun-

nels, knives and measures. The frying pans. The skillets, pots and cleavers. The reaping hooks and wagon irons. The sickles. Flails. The grindstones. Ladles. Flints and axes. Everything.

"Let's go ahead," she said loudly, as though she gave the sign for her own execution, defiant to the end.

She calmly went about her work, chalking numbers up to make the auction easier. Her eyes surveyed the lawn where everything was piled to be inspected and appraised. All would be auctioned off and carried away, as she and Rarey stood and watched. The lion's share, she knew, would go to Doctorjay for storage in his shed, for that prime pickings would go to the healer was already a foregone conclusion. Not that he needed anything, except for sentiment. The Depression had come like a frightening earthquake and had affected Doctorjay like anyone else. He was too old, in any case, to go back to plowing the earth. But he would surely want Jan's antique iron plow, to donate it to the museum that he and Jan had planned to build, as soon as the harvests improved. Maybe the Russian scythe as well—worn, thin, and dented now?

A dimpled hand lay on her sleeve. "How are you, Josephine?"

Josie's face grew tight with dislike. She cleared her throat. Her voice was glass on glass. "Good morning, Cousin Melly. And how are you today?"

"I meant to call to offer my condolences," sighed Little Melly softly, "but being only human, like everybody else, I couldn't bring myself to call. I bet you didn't sleep a wink, what with your debts and all. If you had only listened and taken boarders in—"

Little Melly had come to partake. She was there to take in the drama. She was prepared and fortified, in hat and white, striped socks. She'd given her two braids an extra-careful combing, anchored a pink bow, and ironed fifty pleats into her skirt. She quivered like a bowl of pudding.

Josie threw her own glove into the ring. "Is this your finest hour?"

Little Melly shook her head, troubled but forgiving. "Whatever do you mean?"

She understood what made for peace in Mennotown. She didn't have to lift her voice, she was adept at setting an example. "Don't talk like that, my dear. It's really not becoming—" Taking in the auction crowd with a sad and misty eye, she added ruefully: "I thought no one would come, what with the scarcity of cash. But look at this. Just look at all the people." With a hefty little heave and a proprietary air, she settled her broad hips atop a bedroom dresser.

"Ah, my," she sighed. "Who would have thought that it would come to this—" Her lips twisted into a smile. She could restrain herself no longer. Her legs were dangling in the air; she was ripe with anticipation.

"I want to bid on her sewing machine," she announced to the people around her. "I might as well make sure it's mine before somebody else takes off with it. I saved my money by taking in boarders. I have plans to put that old Singer to excellent use—"

Despite her lowered lashes, Little Melly could see clearly: a neighbor's jaw fell low with disappointment; she had wanted that sewing machine for herself.

"At least she'll get a decent price, Josie will," she added charitably. "I'll do that for Jan's sake. I owe him that. Some people have forgotten, but Jan and I—we used to go way back! Way back! For his sake, I'll bid just as high as I can—"

"You look as guilty, Little Melly," said Josie with a smile as crooked as a legendary street in San Francisco described in one of Rarey's books, "as if you were about to rob someone's apple tree."

But Little Melly just said: "Pooh!" and smiled forgivingly. She gently dropped her gaze to show she bore no grudges.

"Why not me, Josephine? Why not keep things of value in the family? I want that box of yarn. That set of bobbins, too. At least then you can come and do your mending in my home. As often as you like—"

There was no ready comeback to that parting shot, and Josie

turned her back and walked away with Rarey by her side, still skinny by Mennotown standards, sidestepping several relatives who were eagerly digging through chisels.

"Hey, Doctorjay! Hey-hey-hey, Doctorjay!" The crowd broke into applause.

*"Me-he-hellon pulled the whistle—*

*Hoo-hoo-hoover rang the bell—!"* hooted Doctorjay, and never mind his age!

Even from the distance, you could tell: one drink had led to another. The dog yelped once, then cowered. The cat shot up a tree. Archie came flying to throw open the gates—as wide as he possibly could. All heads turned right as if a swivel moved them thus. People stopped shuffling and fingering items.

*"And the co-ho-hountry*

*went to hell—"*

A brisk tail wind was propelling Doctorjay, and sparks flew liberally from his mustache as he came slithering around the corner in his flivver. The tires screeched. The motorcar went "whooosh" and Abigail, who had come early to post herself next to a pile of special fishing rods to make sure that her sons had every chance to do their pick-and-choose, let out a bleat of terror.

*"Wa-ha-hall Street gave the signal,"* bellowed Doctorjay, and the crowd took up the chant at once: *"—and the cou-hou-hountry went to hell—!"*

The Donoghues fell into edgy snickers. They started swaying with the rhythm and the lyrics of the song: *"—and the co—ho—hountry went to hell!"*

The healer was magnificently drunk. He scattered people left and right as if they were just chaff. He ruddered through the crowd while looking for a chair onto which he could climb for the sake of still better surveillance. His chin was thrust out; his Adam's apple danced as it had danced in church, at Jan's sad, somber services.

"Now hear me out! Now hear me out!" howled Doctorjay. Determined he was; combative he felt; no one would stop him

this morning! It was clear he was livid with rage. The *Wichita Eagle* reporters kept pushing and shoving to get a better look. "My turn! This is my turn! You're in for a blistering sermon. I'm preaching today! I'm preaching today! But first things first!"

At that, he drew Jan's pistol from his trousers and shot a hole into the sky. "Our country went to hell! Is that the American way?"

The Donoghues ducked expertly. The banker flinched as though he had been hit, and his heart dropped into his trousers.

"Is that the American way? To knock somebody down? And then keep hitting him? And hitting him? And hitting him—?"

The healer was a beast that day, beside himself with grief. He headed straight for Josephine, who stood there, in high heels. His smoking pistol in his hand, now roaring like a lion out of Africa, he headed straight for her and put an iron arm around her heaving shoulder as though she were a harlot and he an eager dolt. He swung himself around and all but lifted her out of her heels and her pretentious stockings.

He fixed the crowd with a stern look and spoke in a voice that held murder.

"Well, now. Speak up. Why are you here? Are you here to get something for nothing?"

The throng retreated visibly. A faint went as good as unnoticed. The newspaper man snapped picture after picture. A timid oldster, hard-of-hearing, commenced to stroke his shedding beard and tried to cup his ear.

The healer took the widow by the shoulders and started spinning her as though she were a top. "Take a good look at her! I said take a good look!" The veins in his neck swelled like strings. "You people are Americans," cried Doctorjay, this in a voice so charged it could have detonated dynamite beneath a barrel filled with kerosene. "This is a damsel in distress. This is your fellow citizen. This country does not kick a person who is down! If someone's down, you help him up! You help him up and dust his trousers! That's what you do! That's what you do! Do you need me to tell you that?" His gun was waving angry arches.

"Bring me," demanded Doctorjay, as if he were a Southern Baptist instead of just a loosey-goosey Lutheran who shunned salvation still, no matter what the urgency, "old Lizzy's Russian Bible. Bring me the Bible she brought all the way from Apanlee—"

You never saw Archibald scurry so fast, right through the hostile crowd.

"Since we just buried Dewey Epp," gasped Doctorjay, his voice a somersault, as if this were a lark, a comedy, as if this were the happiest of occasions, "he cannot boot me out of church. Can he? He-he. Chiefly he can't since I have never joined—"

The banker's face told all: this isn't going to get any better.

"See that? See that?" barked Doctorjay. He plowed into his pocket and brought up a handful of change. "What am I holding in my hand?"

"That's money," acknowledged the banker. From the crowd came an uneasy hoot. The banker's eyelids started twitching. Robert, the postal attendant, recovered his grin. Frankie, the grocery clerk, craned his long neck to get a better look.

"What kind of money, mister?" demanded Doctorjay and looked just like a Hottentot about to scalp the banker and have himself a feast.

"I guess—I guess it's honest money," the bankster stuttered feebly, and wiped across his brow. Wet patches formed under his armpits.

"Hah! Right you are!" roared Doctorjay. "How can you tell? An overdue patient just paid up his bill. Is that a stroke of luck, or what? I feel like bidding lavishly. I'm bidding this dime here on Lizzy's milk buckets. A dime for the buckets that started it all. A silver dime for Lizzy's buckets!" He kept waving his pistol about.

A neighbor tugged him by the sleeve. "You can't do that! The floor is set. The widow herself set the floor. A dollar and a quarter for six buckets—"

"Who says I can't? You say I can't?" tongue-lashed a beetred Doctorjay. "This is America! America! This is God's coun-

try, folks! In God's own country, don't you know? A citizen can do exactly as he pleases? That's what my good friend Lizzy used to say—"

A ground swell of voices replied with a sigh. The healer pulled his checkered handkerchief and vigorously blew his nose.

"Those were her buckets, folks. I see her still, as if it happened yesterday. She sat there on those dented pails amidst the weeds of prairie land—"

The people hushed at that.

"—and started showing off with not a penny to her name: 'I'll have the fattest cows! I'll have the strongest calves—!' She came from Apanlee. She wasn't common folk. She came from bookish people, steeped in all kinds of knowledge. But once she came to Kansas, my good friend Lizzy knew: 'We can't be both. Let us, therefore, be pious rather than poetic—'" His jaw began to tremble. He started sniffling noisily. "She said: 'We can't be fancy here. We must lead useful lives. I'll set a fine example.' Her special qualities just radiated out from her without the benefit of schooling. A sack of potatoes, a gunny sack filled to the seams with dry buffalo chips—those things, to her, were poetry. When she produced a loaf of bread—why, that was symmetry! That's what I call perfection! Her chickens multiplied like algebra. God rest her gallant soul."

His voice was quivering with agitation; he stared at Josephine who fought with a constricted throat. He spoke again, this time in his finest High German:

"Her tulips? Every color of the rainbow. She didn't need a brush and easel. See over there? That naked spot? That's where it all began. That's where old Lizzy's sod house used to be. That was before the Santa Fe hauled in the fancy lumber with which Jan built the house. Debtfree. That was before the banksters came and put all values upside down and told him bad was good and black was white and paper good as gold—"

The crowd stood there, in silence. A few had taken off their hats.

"—you listen, Josephine! You think you must be first in eve-

rything? She was ahead of you, first class in every way. She was the first to own a hand pump by the sink—next to a wooden drain board!—and when that hand pump squeaked, the angels sang in harmony. I heard them harmonize. The angels sang when Lizzy mashed potatoes. Believe you me, the Lord hummed right along. And when she graduated to a cistern, she thought she had it made—"

Huge tears were rolling down his cheeks and fell into the grass. All eyes were riveted on Josie.

"I looked at her and knew: this is a queen. She's aristocracy. I put my doctor shingle upside down; she quietly set it right. She always paid the grocer. She never belittled Annetta. She melted down her past and helped me get rid of my hymen!"

"Your hyphen!" whispered Josephine, convulsed with her emotions, red as her own geraniums.

But Doctorjay was swinging now; he paid no heed to Josie. Her and her fancy words! He was swinging his speech as though swinging a child by its heels.

"She had a son. I know. I know. Don't interrupt me now! I'm not yet finished, see? You say she had a dozen children, if you count those that died too soon and those that moved away—" His voice was crackling with emotion. "She loved them all—but Jan! Jan was the apple of her eye. That youngster was her favorite. How she loved Jan! She thought she saw the seventh wonder of the world. She honored him, and she respected him. She stood behind his chair to watch him eat—that was her happiness. She loved him more than life itself because she knew: 'He loves the soil. Within that freckled fellow sings the blood of generations—'"

The crowd had hushed. A few reached for each other. They formed a chain of human hands.

"While he was still a boy, with hardly any mustache, he looked for soil no plow had ever touched, and when he found that soil, it was as if he'd found a bride. I watched him as he hauled the harvests, a wheelbarrow full at a time! That boy knew deeper joy than any king on any throne, just sitting on his haystack, just

shouting to the world—"

Something within Doctorjay turned stony then, and barren as a desert. He struggled with his voice until he held it firmly in his fists.

"He, too, was unlearned," he added, facing Josie fully, and there was pain and shame and anger in his face the likes of which she'd never seen in her entire life. "But what of that? Do you judge love by text? Do you judge manhood by a comma? There was no time for schools. Who would have fed the herds? Who would have tended to the cows? From inside him came knowledge. From ancestry. Without the benefit of books he was the one who first converted everything. To steam. To gasoline. His crop varieties—the envy of the nation! He said to me once, shyly: 'My children's children will yet claim the universe—' He spread his arms across his family much as an eagle spreads its wings. Jan knew as no one knew: without a sense of duty to his family and to his soil, a man is not a man."

Little Melly had, by then, collapsed into herself, dissolved into a flood of ready tears. She felt as naked as a new-born sparrow in the spring while memories of forty years ago commenced to swirl like dervishes. "He was my love," she told herself. "He should have been my man."

She knew the picture Doctorjay was calling forth; it was her property; she kept it framed and dusted it daily, next to her stomach bitters. Every time she looked at it, a thrill ran down her spine. She looked with swimming eyes at Doctorjay to hear him say that now, but Doctorjay just took her spinster heart and broke it right in two as though it were a pretzel.

"And you! You listen, Little Melly! Don't look at me like that! I read you like a book. I know you would have specialized in motherhood. That would have been your calling. You were pretty and pink in those years! You had an ample bosom! You were rosy and shone like a ham! You would have thrown yourself into domestic life as Josie never did. But see? He didn't choose you, Missy. Why not? Go ask yourself why not. I'll give you one good reason. Because his blood ran strong. He

craved a worthy partner. You didn't see that. Josie did. So he chose her. Not you. And you? You joined the Hallelujah choir so everybody said: 'Oh, look at Little Melly. So wronged, and yet so brave!' But on the sly, what did you do? You turned into a telephoniac! You were like a mosquito: you pricked, and you drank blood. That's what Jan understood and loved in Josephine: The fairness of her soul. She stretched her arms beyond the boundaries of Mennotown, as you did not. That's why. Jan looked into her dancing eyes and put himself in mortal peril. We saw it flickering—that small, forbidden flame. We should have stepped on it—"

Now it was Josie's turn. He set to pummeling her savagely with words stored deep within. "You, Josie! It's your turn. You were a daffodil, and we just common dandelions? That's what you thought? We were just common folks? With scars and warts and calluses? And you were different? Better? When you came here to live with us, when you fell to the floor and started screaming, I should have pulled you upright by your braids and doused you then and there! I should have had your wisdom teeth extracted on the spot! I stood all ready with my pliers, but Jan—Jan held me back by my own belt and said: "She's just a child. She's just a little girl. Only the sky is as pretty as Josie.'

"But he was wrong. You weren't pretty then. You aren't pretty now. You're selfish, Josie! Selfish! Life isn't gloss. It's duty. There's nothing pretty about selfishness! Your wrinkles all run right to left, not up and down, as nature likes its wrinkles. You people! Look at her! Her husband showered her with status. At testimonial dinners, he seated her above the salt. Did he not feed her well? Did he not cherish her? She was the first who had a home with electricity. She was the first who had a telephone, a double laundry tub. And she? What did she do? She launched a thunderbolt against his groin as though he were her enemy. He loved her, and he married her. And she? She wounded him with disobedience. She took all her housewifely duties to town. She had no business typing letters for the Finkelsteins—"

He turned to Josephine directly: "It wasn't that he was a

man, and you were just a woman. That wasn't it at all. It wasn't this suffragist nonsense. It was the end effect. It was the end result. Had you shown him respect, that would have made him ten feet tall. That would have made him happy. How often did I hear him say: 'Blow out the light now, kitten!' with longing in his voice. But you? You hung his manhood like a rooster from the ceiling by the heels! That's not the way to treat a man who gave you all he had—!"

He took the widow by her shoulders so that she faced the neighbors, a thick, united cluster.

"You face your music, Josephine. You bridle your sharp tongue. You listen to what I and others have to say. You hate *vareniki*? You do not like our diphthongs? You say you hate our songs? You've despised us from the time you came here, with the devil dancing in your eyes. You wounded us at every opportunity. You saw an enemy in every relative you met. The Finkelsteins are fancier than we are? They're smarter than we are? Ha! Phooey, Josephine! We're sturdier than they are! Our roots go deep into the earth. Where is their grain? Where is their Apanlee?"

They stood in a circle, all holding hands, all humming with emotion. But Doctorjay had not yet finished with his sermon, and finish it he would.

"When we used poor and stilted grammar, you cast sarcastic glances, Don't think we haven't noticed. Don't think it didn't hurt. Had not Jan loved you so, we would have put a stop to it. A woman should appear in print but twice: when she marries; when she dies. But you? How often were you in the paper, on spiked heels yet, next to the Socialists? We have been patient with your notions. Our patience has run out. You make an inward resolution to reform. No more inflammatory talk, you hear? Out with the jaundiced arguments about corsets and curls and self-esteem! Now is your opportunity to change, as Dewey always said—"

He placed his searchlight there.

"And Dewey! Dewey Epp, whom I raised from his soggy

diapers. The preacher whom we buried yesterday was not the smartest man who ever walked on Appian Way. In fact, he was a fool! But see? He was cheap, and he, too, had his place. He was cheaper than the police, and he kept our town spic and span. The peasants used to say way back in the old country: The mightier Thou are, God, the greater the tsar's joy. I often looked at him and saw his face was small and mean and understood why you disliked him so. So Dewey was a dullard? Perhaps. What preacher isn't dull and boring? They bore you right out of your tree. But look at what he proffered! The Sermon on the Mount! The Ten Commandments, Josie! That's what it's all about. Good neighbors living within range of one another so they can help each other without words in times of greatest need. You never knew that, did you? When Dewey hounded you, as many times he did, it did not mean you shouldn't have some fun. What's fun? All people are entitled to some fun. I like some fun myself. But don't forget: fun is a feather, while pride is a boulder. A boulder! It anchors you to everything that's right. It keeps you down; it steadies you and keeps you from the riffraff and the rabble—"

Heads now turned left, to face the Donoghues, backed up into the wall, for clearly, they were next.

"What? Can't you take a joke?" one mumbled timidly before he slunk away, the others following, toe over heel, but now no stopping Doctorjay. He did not fail his neighbors' expectations.

"And you! You there. You owe your life to Lizzy! I see her still the night that you were born—she sat there with a towel in one hand and a pot of coffee in the other, waiting up all night with me, just sitting, watching, praying. And when you finally came out, she turned to me and said: 'Their heads are twisted to the left, and something within them is broken.' From the cradle, you were trouble. Heels first, that's how you arrived in this world! That's how you live. That's how you'll die. That's trouble! I mean trouble!"

He had to stop to blow his nose and dab his eyes once more,

but he was not yet finished. He finished them as well, albeit in absentia, and shook an angry fist:

"She sat them down and gave them plenty of advice. Was it her fault they did not heed her words? They stepped in every chicken dropping and then they ran to Washington, complaining of the stink. She listened to their woes and came up with a number of solutions. I watched them through the years, and don't tell me that I watched only Abigail. I know all their shenanigans. Life on a silver platter, right? Not while I still have breath left—"

Doctorjay sucked in a deep and trembling gulp of air and dropped onto one knee before Jan's little son:

"You, Rarey. You are last. Your father was a citizen. He built a fine community. He came here before Mennotown was Mennotown, a place so small you couldn't even find it on a map. Just dirt roads. Nothing else. He kept long hours at the mill. He didn't ask for handouts. He didn't claim he was entitled to free meals. This country lied to him. The banksters said: 'If you play by our rules, the rules will serve you well.' That is some joke! Some monumental joke! His dream betrayed, his pride in shreds, that's how your father died. This country broke his heart. This country is no longer pretty. Someone stole its core. Don't ask me how it happened. It's all mixed up with dynamite, Karl Marx, free love, and curly hair. The bread these hucksters eat, your father grew. The town he built, the crooks and hucksters own. The people he elected run someone else's show. Whose show? Not mine. Not yours. And not your father's either. They will not serve us well. Let's not let our enemies choose all our enemies for us!"

He caught himself. He spoke as though to himself:

"And even I. I was his friend, but was I vigilant? I'm weeping over someone whose murderer I am. What did I do to help him out? I should have been his comrade. I didn't see his pain. I lusted after Abigail. While his strong farmer's heart was breaking with the betrayal of it all, I told him flivver jokes! I asked him to chuckle with Amos 'n Andy. Jan wasn't asking for the moon. What did he need to pull himself out of this pit his own

elected leaders dug? A wife who was a wife. A friend who was a friend. A town that was a town. A bankster with a heart."

He faced the banker now, down on his knees, with Rarey in his arms. "This is Jan's son. When he began to work for usury, no longer paying cash on cash, you put his pecker in your pocket. He could have made it through the dirty decade with just a little help from you. Your interest crushed his bones—" The healer placed his hand on Lizzy's Bible and trumpeted through tears: "So help me, dearest God in Heaven. You gave him this land. The banksters won't take it away."

And then he stood.

"See this? That's all the cash I have. Exactly fifteen dollars. This is my show. I'm bidding seven dollars here on that fine set of plows—"

The auctioneer retrieved his voice. "No! No! You can't do that! The floor's been set at twelve—"

"I can't? Who says I can't?" The healer's voice was booming like a cannon. He pointed his beard in defiance. "Don't tell me what I can and cannot do! I voted in this government. And I can vote it out. You mean to tell me now I have no speaking part? I'm bidding seven. Seven dollars! On second thought, I'm bidding six. And as I look around this minute, I can see that my good neighbor, Peter Friesen, thinks he's bidding five—"

The farmer Friesen gulped and sputtered. "Upwards! Upwards! The widow needs the cash!"

"Is that a fact?" hissed Doctorjay. He started fingering the trigger. "Don't you, too, feel a secret urge to bid four greenbacks on Jan's plows?"

A sheen sat on the farmer Unruh's forehead. "I guess I do," he stuttered, his eyes on the gun, his beard full of tears. "Four bucks for the entire set of plows—"

"Well! Fancy that. Now there's two of us who feel like bidding downwards. Might there be three? What? Brother Penner?"

The farmer Penner cleared his throat. "Two-fifty," he said hoarsely, and wiped the tears out of his wrinkles. "Jan once lent

me an extra mule when mine broke an ankle in one of the ruts–"

"I'm topping you. I'm bidding two—"

"One-seventy-five!"

"One-fifty—"

"One."

"Three quarters—"

"Fifty-"

"Fifty one! Fifty two! Fifty taken!" cried the auctioneer, thick perspiration forming on his upper lip.

The bonesetter was howling now. "We're on a roll! We're on a roll. Jan's threshers? Splendid threshers! Four bucks for the entire set?"

"Two-fifty!" shouted several people from the crowd.

"I see it's catching on!" trumpeted Doctorjay. "I see at least two dozen people who have caught on to what this day is all about—"

"Three fifty—" cried the banker, shrilly. "That was the floor. We did agree there'd be a floor. The widow herself said—"

Doctorjay turned to the banker and said sharply: "Sit down, you toady, and shut up! or I'll cancel your membership in the Chamber of Commerce. Downwards! Downwards, Christian Soldiers—!" He pointed both thumbs to the floor. "That's how we're bidding today! I don't bid upwards on this brand new, shiny day and don't know anyone who does."

"A dime on that fine, pretty chest," announced a young mother, a baby nestling in her arms. "Hop down, Little Melly! This minute. Get off Josie's chest."

"A penny. A penny once. A penny twice. A penny taken for the chest—"

That is the splendid story, repeated to this day. Thus went the auction backwards, as far as it could go, and Josie, too, much like a mare in front of an abyss, stopped right in time. And started walking backward. Right there. It was magnificent. In Josie's soul that day, the story goes, a bitter struggle came to rest. She

put away her angry arrows. Had Lizzy known, she would have been so pleased—that, in the end, Jan's widow learned her lesson well and settled down to Mason jars. Like everybody else.

When all was said and done, the bonesetter said in his thickest tongue: "Vell! Finally! Ve haff our country back."

The coins piled up in a small heap next to his smoking pistol. He turned two red-rimmed eyes, as if they were two searchlights, on Jan's young son and said: "Come here. You do your numbers, laddie. You help me count, will you? If we believe your mother's boasts, you've got a brain. You've got the quickest mind in town—"

The count turned out to be exactly fifteen dollars.

"Fifteen dollars? You don't say! That's what a good man's lifetime work is worth? How my good Noralee would have rejoiced. She always tried to get the best of Lizzy—" The healer dabbed his lids. "Now she is gone. And Lizzy, too. And I will die tomorrow. And, in the meantime, I have Abigail to occupy my time. She'll eat me out of house and home. I'll have my hands full keeping up. Here is the cash. It's yours. I'm not a farmer, Rarey. I do not need your father's farm. If you permit me, son, I'll sell it back to you—"

"Doctorjay, I don't have fifteen dollars. This cash goes to the bank."

"Why, in that case," said Doctorjay, "I'm sure our bankster here will want to do a little business with you by giving you a line of credit at reasonable interest that won't eat up your soul!"

The banker gulped three times and muttered something sounding like collateral. The healer took the banker firmly by his collar:

"No usury in Mennotown. No monkey business here. No hanky panky in quadruplicates. His father's name is plenty of collateral—"

The banker dove into the crowd and disappeared to hoots and hisses, coattails flapping. The healer squatted next to Josie's son so that their eyes were level, and here is what he said:

"You listen, lad. You listen hard. You're in this for the long

haul. You think you're you? You aren't you. You're but a tiny morsel. You are so small you, too, will come and go. In the blink of an eye, you'll be gone. But on the other hand, you're tall. Because you have a history. Because of Apanlee. You came of honorable stock. Your future is already charted. The business of America? It's now your business, laddie. You're young. We're old. We all count on you Rarey. You put away your easels until the work is done! You put your shoulder to the wheel and shove! You include yourself in! Is that understood? Repeat after me: 'I include myself in.'"

Rarey spoke softly: "I include myself in."

"Hand me the liquidation papers, Josephine."

They say she pulled her mirror. They say she took a good look at herself, and then she looked around, and what she saw were faces of a thousand friends, and all of them were open. Naked. Smiling.

And Josie said: "Hand me my travel papers."

She tore them up. She threw them high into the air. The Kansas wind blew them about. She stopped herself just in the nick of time from hurling her young son into vast space without that pride that was imported out of Apanlee to hold him back and pin him down and give him solid moorings. And everybody knew: the soil of her soul had been plowed. The seeds of pride would grow.

Those who are still alive remember it as if it happened yesterday. They'll tell you with emotion shining in their faces: they walked toward each other—the lone and stubborn heretic and the solidified *Gemeend.* Bareheaded, they stood in a circle around her, holding hands, breaking into a favorite hymn. And many eyes were moist. The earth was theirs. The grain was theirs. The sun was theirs as well, on loan from the Lord in the sky. It was still hanging there, eternally, a glob of gold amid the boundless sky of Kansas that shone its rays on gladness and goodwill, and even Little Melly gave a little hiccup, high and shrill, and summarized it all: "Will you now join our quilting bee?" and Josie gulped and said: "I will. I do. You have my solemn word—"

She had not cried for more than thirty years. She started crying now. Her tears started falling like raindrops.

Had there been cannons somewhere, they would have thundered their salute. Had there been fireworks, they would have flowered in the clouds. Where one world ended, another began. From that day on, her excesses were gone. She changed, and for the better. From that day on, she bought for durability. She gave when deacons knocked. She took up Lizzy's butter churns. When someone came to ask her for a cookie recipe, she shared it willingly.

You hear this story still—in Kansas, in Nebraska, in Winnipeg, in the Dakotas. They swear she said that sunny, fragrant morning of the auction: "I will."

She said: "I do."

She said like Ruth: "Let Thy God by my God. Thy people be my people—"

Not in so many words, of course—for saying that out loud took time. Getting rid of her poodle took time. Getting rid of the Hebrews took more time, for she'd grown used to them. But best of all, the story goes, not ever did she sin again against the spirit of the times by storming the Rotarians.

# Lebensraum! - Book III - Chapters 78 - 125

Reviewed by Michael S. McMillen

Of all America's foes in all of her wars, no enemy has been more vilified for so long as the Third Reich. Every now and again, someone wonders why.

If novelty enhances a novel's appeal, Lebensraum! - Book III should be a bestseller. The sections dealing with the Second World War will strike many readers as the literary equivalent of a photographic negative. For a change, the Nazis are wearing the white hats.

While writing this review, I came across a relevant quotation from *Founding Father* by Richard Whalen: "World War II was the liberals' war and they are understandably determined to uphold their version of its origins with all the formidable political and intellectual resources at their command."

Since the early 1940s, Adolf Hitler has been the West's Villain for All Seasons. Books, plays, movies, "docudramas," and television series feature Nazis and Germans interchangeably in the stock roles of archetype of evil and scourge of mankind. The only time National Socialists aren't portrayed as goose-stepping demons is when they are cast as hyperpunctilious, heiling buffoons.

In Lebensraum! - Book III the reader will find no such caricatures of the German Volk. He will find instead an army and a people fighting fiercely to preserve their own race, a nation stung to the core by an all-destroying, internationalist foe.

It would be petty to object that Lebensraum! Book III fails to present an objective moral study of Hitler and his Reich. As a novel, the focus of Lebensraum! is not statistical analysis of the motives and actions of its characters. Lebensraum! is not a comprehensive history of World War II. The story is, however, rooted in fact.

History attests that there were people during the Second

World War who welcomed the Nazis as saviors and heroes. The German pioneers of Lebensraum! who had once grown prosperous under the Romanovs are their representatives.

When one considers the nature of Stalin's gulag state, its goal of yoking all its subject under collectives directed by a central committee in Moscow, one can understand that the people crushed under its iron boot might have looked upon the armies of the Führer with grateful anticipation.

Lebensraum! - Book III gives us an exciting and heartbreaking glimpse of one people's moment of vindication against a comprehensively brutal engine of oppression. After the hellish terror unleashed by the Soviet revolution, Justice cries out for vengeance from the skies – or from the earth.

Young Jonathan, who escaped from the Soviets and found his way to Germany, grows into a loyal soldier of the Fatherland, and is among the Landsers who reclaim – albeit temporarily – Apanlee for its rightful owners.

Eventually, owing to overextension and strategic errors on the part of the Fuehrer (e.g., his refusal to permit retreat) the Wehrmacht is driven back by the Red Army, now counted among the Allies. One of the tragedies stalking the stoic German survivors is that those who could have helped defend them, side instead with the beast seeking to devour them.

The remnants of the Neufeld and Epp clans in the Ukraine are unable to understand the world's indifference to their suffering. They cannot imagine that the rest of the world is infected with the same notions of international collectivism as the Soviet state.

They are utterly baffled and mystified when America, the land of Liberty, which received their own kin not so many decades earlier, joins forces with Stalin and his Reds.

When people are faced with such an inexplicable fact, they seek desperately to satisfy themselves with some kind of an answer. Lebensraum! records accurately the answer that many fixed upon: international Jewry.

The objective reader will bear in mind that the anti-Judaism

expressed by some characters in these novels is not an invention of the author. The reader would do well to note that most of the main characters bear no animosity towards the Jews or anyone else. They simply wish to be left alone. Moreover, at one point, young Jonathan starts to tell what sounds like an off-colour story about Jews and is quickly chastised by Heidi, the woman who had rescued him from the streets. She explains that some of the good people with whom she had traded are Jews. The point, I believe, is that although bigoted anti-semitism unfortunately existed in Germany and elsewhere, it has nothing to do with the desire of the Germans for freedom and living space.

For centuries, the Jews had been viewed with suspicion throughout Christian Europe. This is not fundamentally because they happened to be adept at trade and finance; these functions are vital to an economy and constitute nothing inherently dishonourable or exploitative. Marked by their refusal to embrace the cross and creed of Christ, the Jews were frozen out of the circle of production by the economically fastidious (and sometimes woefully ignorant) Christians, and they became the exchangers, lenders and middlemen. Not surprisingly, many succumbed to the temptations inherent in such preoccupations and came to regard the people whose money they managed as convenient nuisances– profitable in the collective but of little consequence individually.

Marxism views the mass of men essentially the same way – and excoriates Christianity to boot. Socialist mythology sees its chosen people – the proletariat or working class – scattered and dispersed across the world and mistreated by bourgeois, primarily Christian, society.

Many Jews became the willing spokesmen and penmen for this new global ideology. Many were archly sympathetic to its call for a strictly secular state that would tear down the crosses and churches in deference to dreams of futuristic fraternity and equality.

Marx promised a far-off Utopia to all men in exchange for a radical break with the individualistic, nationalist Christian past.

The proverbial wandering Jew became in many instances an ambitious booster for both the international banker and international bolshevik. The apparent contradiction in this union of banksters and rowdies continues to mislead the unwary to this day.

Ingrid Rimland has described the concomitant growth of these two forces vividly and dramatically in Lebensraum!, particularly in Book III. Her picture of an America slouching through the Roosevelt years convinced of the gospel verity of the New York Times is not a flattering one.

Nevertheless I, as a patriotic American who believes in the founding principles of this nation, applaud the author for penning so blunt a satire of her adopted land.

America has often been described as a country with a great and eager heart. Sometimes her eagerness does her no good: the willingness to believe the glowing and deceptive dispatches from the Soviet Union; the reflexive anti-Germanism imbibed freely from the media outlets of the era; the gullible surrender to state welfarism, so long as it is buttered liberally with prattle of "compassion" and "tolerance."; the sheep-like acquiescence in the quasi-religion of received propaganda concerning the nature and extent of German mistreatment of the Jews during the war.

All this – what one might dub a pathological obsession with acting out good intentions – is symbolozed by Rarey Neufeld, who goes enthusiastically off to war to kill his German brethren for Uncle Sam (and Uncle Joe). Book III ends with a touching letter to his wife from this genuinely good man, who is killed in the waning hours of the war by anti-aircraft fire from his own German cousin, Erika.

World War II was a disaster for everyone involved. Nevertheless, the corruption and self-hatred it fomented in the USA and Germany contributed to the unthinkable rise of the clumsy but vicious and deadly Soviet Empire.

Some claim to see in the political fall of the unwieldy beast the death of Communism. Such people are sadly mistaken. Communism today reigns and runs rampant on American college campuses and in the nooks and crannies of government both here and

in Western Europe.

Today "internationalism" has become "globalism" and the UN has replaced the Red Army as the socialists' army of choice. I say here in sorrow and in anger that this very trilogy that I am reviewing will probably be banned in some of the "democracies" that helped defeat Hitler and prop up Stalin.

What God's plan for this weary world may be, I do not profess to speculate upon. I do assert, however, that the political ideas and ideals that the world needs have already been formulated - and were once put into practice for nearly a century - right here in America.

It's here in America that Ingrid Rimland's trilogy is being published. If America does not speak out on behalf of the rights of man and for the unhindered pursuit of truth, who will?

Ingrid Rimland has spoken out again - eloquently and clearly. Those who do not share her vision of America are free to disagree and to criticize.

Those who care to join her in this literary quest for Lebensraum! will find a good story well told. What more can you ask of a novelist?

# Ingrid Rimland

# Lebensraum!

## The Dream of Land and Peace



Book 3

Ingrid Rimland was a child during World War II, born to Mennonite wheat farmers in the Ukraine who had been persecuted in the Soviet Union for their pacifist beliefs. The end of World War II saw her and her family undertake a 1000 mile trek back to the homeland of their forefathers, Germany, now a war-devastated wasteland.

From there, still a youngster, she moved with her family and friends to the rain forests of Paraguay to pioneer the jungle and live, as her grandmother put it, " . . . far from the wicked world."

Since the early days of her youth, Ingrid Rimland has come vast intellectual distances. She first made a name for herself with her award-winning novel, The Wanderers, (Concordia Publishing House, 1977, Bantam Books, 1978) that depicted the German soldiers not as conquerors but as liberators and heroes in the eyes of an ethnically savagely besieged community, about to be annihilated in one of Stalin's "ethnic cleansing" operations.

In 1984, Arena Press published Furies, a powerful autobiography describing her search for freedom from intellectual oppression. She also started writing columns, articles and book reviews for dozens of papers and magazines in America and won a number of journalistic prizes and honors.

In the age of the revolutionary Internet, Ingrid Rimland dramatically wrote herself into the annals of the Freedom of Speech struggle when she defended the world-famous Revisionist Zundelsite, a website she created and administered, against a furious onslaught of powerful private and government censorship forces arraigned against her website to prevent the world from discovering a part of World War II history hitherto never exposed to an unsuspecting, misled public.

In the first two months of 1996, 1300 websites went dark in Germany in a futile attempt by German authorities to prevent German students from accessing the American-based Zundelsite - an Internet "First".

In response to that challenge, "Zundelsite mirrors" shot up spontaneously at major universities all over the globe, as young "cyber fighters" helped to defy the censors - another "First".

In August of the same year, eight historical documents on the Zundelsite were indexed - that is, forbidden - by the German government, on grounds that their historical contents were "disorienting to minors".

In the busiest week of Christmas 1996, nearly 30 million anonymous e-mail letters were slammed into the Zundelsite server system from unknown origins in Canada in an attempt to terrorize the server owner into denying the Zundelsite a place in cyberspace. Canadian and American police have never found the Internet terrorists.

Even as this book goes to print, powerful special interests manipulating the government of Canada are attempting to shut down the Zundelsite through its misnamed "Human Rights Commission" by a desperate and bizarre act - mislabeling the Internet to be a "telephone"!

Lebensraum! - a three part historical novel - is Ingrid Rimland's latest contribution to the intellectual discipline called "Revisionism" - an intellectual movement that insists that history does not belong to the manipulators behind the fratricidal wars of our century but should be freely accessible to all freedom-loving people.

**URL: http://www.zundelsite.com**
**URL: http://www.webcom.com/ina**
**E-Mail: irimland@cts.com**
**Cover photograph: Barry Evans**
**Cover design: Ernst Zündel**

ISBN 1-896006-03-5
52500>
9 781896 006031

*I dedicate this saga*
*to the maligned heroes*
*and the forgotten victims of*
*several fratricidal wars in our century -*
*men and women, brave beyond belief,*
*who hurled themselves against the forces*
*of the New World Order*

Copyright © 1998 Ingrid A. Rimland

First publication in March of 1998

Samisdat Publishers, Inc.
206 Carlton Street, Toronto,
Ontario, Canada
M5A 2L1

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission from the author, except for the quotation of brief passages in reviews.

Cover illustration by Ernst Zündel

Text set in AGaramond Semibold 12

Written and published in the United States. Printed and bound by KNI Incorporated, Anaheim, California, USA

ISBN 1-896006-03-5

This is Book III of a trilogy. Book I and II are available by writing to:

6965 El Camino Real, # 105-588
La Costa, CA 92009

Fax: 760-929-2268

# Lebensraum!

## The Dream of Land and Peace

A Novel

by

Ingrid Rimland

Book III

*Lebensraum! spans seven generations and 200 years. It is a story told to me a thousand times in many different voices: that there was once a place called "Apanlee" that fell to the Red Terror.*

*A novel is, by definition, fiction against the backdrop of genuine emotions. This novel has been my attempt to grasp and to extract the interplay between opposing ideologies, to find the core of human tragedies that make up cold statistics.*

*The novel's voice belongs to "Erika" who, in this saga, is older than I was when I experienced World War II. She is, however, of the transition generation, as I am. Hers is the ethnic voice in this novel, trying to find the right words to own up to the pride and courage that were the hallmarks of her people.*

*She learns to say: "Our history belongs to us. It won't be written, from now on, by anybody else but us."*

*This family saga was gleaned from the driftwood of history. The people I have tried to show to be of flesh and blood came of a tightly knit community of Russian-German ancestry.*

*Ingrid Rimland*

# Lebensraum! - Book I - Chapters 1-39

Reviewed by Michael S. McMillen

Push-button critics and sound-bite sages tell us that the age of the epic is past. They are wrong. Ingrid Rimland has written an inter-generational, moral panorama—an epic in prose depicting what people can be when they embrace both freedom and responsibility.

Like the poets of ancient Greece, she does not evade evil. This author knows the human condition. She illustrates what it takes for man to earn his bread—and what happens when a dash of leaven is added to the whole, wanton cruelty.

Lebensraum! is her trilogy, which traces the lives and deaths, the loves and hates, the hopes realized and the dreams dashed of people from two Russian-German families, the Neufelds and the Epps.

The first book follows them from their successes in the Ukraine during the early 19th century and closes on the brink of the war that tore Western civilisation asunder and the revolution that was Russia's undoing. It commences with a history lesson recounting the migration of peace-loving German pioneers. Early on, one of the epic's tensions comes screaming into the fore. This group of pacifists bases its creed on the Bible—*sola scriptura*—with no need of intermediaries. They refuse spiritual tribute to Papa, and they refuse military service to Caesar.

Hounded, taxed, persecuted, martyred, the sect clings to life with a robust ardor born of pure Scriptural faith. Their tenacious confidence in their ultimate deliverance helps them forge a stoic endurance and determination in the face of furious persecution.

The hounded pilgrims look to the East for living space, the land, liberty and peace needed to survive and prosper. Eventually they find a patron in the Empress Catherine the Great of Russia, who needs people to cultivate the lands along the Black and Caspian seas. She offers the German pacifists free land, self-rule, protection and exemption from conscription.

From the start, the novel focuses on two complementary approaches to the business of living. "Some dug in deep, as Peter Neufeld did, a man with expert hands and fierce ambition." These are the men of active, curious, inventive minds, men of accurate reckoning and rolled-up sleeves who survey the problem, spit on their palms and get to work.

"Others," we are told, ". . . stayed in their covered wagons from where they prayed to Heaven day and night." Among these people is one of the Elders, a man named Hans Epp.

There is a division of labour among these hearty pioneers. Some dig and reap; others meditate and pray.

Eventually the grave and ambitious Germans establish their settlement and sink firm roots in their adopted land. The story moves steadily through that century of progress when even the land of the Tsars felt something of the heady aroma of freedom.

The peace was not to last for long—on the Eastern front or the Western. The protagonists fall prey to the twin snares of those who cling dogmatically to peace: beclouding, complacent pride in the lasting conditions of contentment and vulnerability to aggressors.

Thus, in the very nature of the people who are to enact this vast drama, we see the seeds of later suffering. Why do the innocent often end up crushed in the bloody mud? The search for Lebensraum! is partially the quest for an answer to this moral conundrum.

One of the themes at the heart of Lebensraum! is that virtue is a necessary condition of life, prosperity and happiness. The pilgrims grow and prosper in a community they name Apanlee, which will become the spiritual magnet, the inspirational font, the symbol of life and "Lebensraum" for the good offspring of the Neufelds and Epps.

Yet early on, a smoking fissure is apparent. As the productive and ambitious—represented by Peet Neufeld, Peter's son—hew a cornucopia out of the rich soil of Apanlee, the pious—represented by Hans Epp's son Willy—begin to chastise and warn that the judgment of God must soon descend and crush the pride

of the successful farmers and artisans.

These warnings go largely unheeded. After all, doesn't God bless thrift and industry? He's on His throne and the Romanovs—now the Apanlee Germans' staunch patrons—are on theirs.

In a heartrending scene, Peet Neufeld and his wife Greta are entertaining a Romanov prince who says, beaming with gratitude, "Peet Neufeld, see that sun? As long as it hangs in the sky, we of the house of Romanov vouch for protection. Always." Sadly, within decades, the devil himself will smash that pledge to dust, dethrone and massacre the Romanovs and unleash terror and death upon Apanlee and all of Russia.

Living space is the call that the industrious heed and follow. Another of the epic's contrasts opens up when some of the Apanlee Germans decide to seek their Lebensraum on the abundant prairies of America.

The cavalcade continues as new babies are born to replenish the souls of those who have died. America appeals to Peet Neufeld's son Nicky because it offers virgin opportunity to people who are willing to stand on their own and earn their keep. Nevertheless, the American apple is not immune to the vicissitudes of life or the rot and corruption engendered by second-handers, parasites and outright thieves.

Nicky and his wife, Willy's daughter Lizzy, set sail for America. Nicky is drowned. Upon arriving in America, the widow Lizzy is swindled by a man named Donoghue for a quick buck and left with a piece of seemingly worthless prairie wilderness for her troubles.

Under Lizzie's maternal guidance, however, her strong and noble son Jan leads his community in building a breadbasket of the Kansas wastes that have fallen to their lot. Contempt turns to envy in the mouths of the swindler and his family, who then seek to wrest the land back in order to sate themselves on the achievements of Jan Neufeld.

The Donoghue's goal through the years will be to "prove" that the sale was only a lease.

As the Germans prosper in their new community of

Mennotown, Kansas, a word begins to sound faintly like the scratching of a hungry rat among trash and shards: Equality. This word will reverberate and knell throughout Lebensraum!

Eventually it will ignite the flames of revolution, explicitly savage in Russia, bureaucratized and sanitized in America. Indeed, it is one of the negative themes of the story, a counterpoint to the thrift, decency and faith that set the builders of Apanlee and of Mennotown apart from and above their fellows.

In scene after scene and encounter after encounter, our author shows us how those who take responsibility for themselves and face their work tenaciously have no need in the world for "Equality" in the sense that is bruited so noisily, that of income redistribution and uniformity of condition.

If equality has any meaning in a political context, it can only be in the sense that each person is an individual with his own rights and must be governed by the same laws and principles and treated by the same standards as all other people.

The heroes and heroines of Lebensraum! learn to their dismay that the baying wolves about them pervert this principle. Equality functions as a demonic wrench to tighten here, loosen there as the whims of the worthless dictate. It twists and strangles the God-fearing and productive in Russia, as ignorant curs who have half-digested intellectual slogans, try to make milch-cows of their betters.

In America, the cry of equality is heard in the baying of the Finkelsteins, who find it a useful political tool and the Donoghues, who find it a standing meal-ticket. Equality corrodes family structure and banishes harmony from the relations between the sexes. The siren song of the suffragettes is heard in the pages of Lebensraum! as a feisty character named Josie—who eventually marries and torments the dutiful Jan Neufeld—despises the vocations of wife and mother and busies herself among the moneylenders and political malcontents.

Finally, those who establish a state religion on the basis of certain peoples' suffering, while ignoring or denigrating the suffering of others, invoke "equality" while seeking to stifle or out-

law even the discussion of truth.

This brings us back to the Revisionist side of Lebensraum! Rimland, who has done so much for World War II Revisionism, takes her mission a step further with Lebensraum!

A movement certainly needs a professional, systematic development in expository prose. Among the many who are providing this are David Irving, Michael Hoffmann II and Ingrid Rimland herself. Nevertheless, if a movement is to gain popular recognition and become part of the warp and woof a civilisation, it must be given flesh and blood, perceptual form. It must be embodied in art. Just as Ayn Rand illustrated her philosophy of Objectivism in characters such as Howard Roark, Dagney Taggart and John Galt, so Ingrid Rimland has given Revisionism a face in the personas of Erika, Jan Neufeld, Jonathan and others.

Lebensraum! is, of course, much more than I have been able to hint here. In its pages are limned the good, bad and ugly feelings of a special band of separatists.

The heroes and heroines of Lebensraum! are in the world, but at odds with it. They are always searching. The allure of productive freedom calls some of them to America; religious forebodings and a misguided spiritual zeal call one group of pilgrims led by Class Epp, Willy's son, on a disastrous trek eastward from Apanlee. The old virtues and customs sustain the good folk, even as newfangled ideas and bold experimental values whistle to them and whisper in their ears.

I was personally struck by the vibrant and cohesive family life that is portrayed in Book I. Rimland's depiction of family rings true to man's nature and potential. Hers is no sugar-coated puff job on the joys and sorrows of kinship. The exigencies of daily life and the social corrosion of a hostile society both take their toll on men and women of the best intentions.

The old ways, however, are always the foundation on which the good folk stand. Indeed, one senses that the robust love nurtured in the bosom of family is itself a vital part of Lebensraum, living space.

Book I ends on an ominous note, as the First World War

and the Soviet revolution hover. The reader must realize that the people of Lebensraum! exhibit the full range of human emotions—from the tender to the desperate to the prejudicial.

Lebensraum! does not omit or evade the suspicions and fears—justified or otherwise—of a misunderstood and often persecuted minority. This minority, however, that grows the world's wheat and mends the world's garments has found few spokesmen or defenders.

In the opening book of Lebensraum! Ingrid Rimland establishes the groundwork for that defense."

## Lebensraum! - Book II - Chapters 40-77

Reviewed by Michael S. McMillen

The second book of Lebensraum! opens with the German pacifists in Apanlee sowing and reaping as rumors of impending war and revolution sweep across Russia.

Hein Neufeld, one of Peet Neufeld's grandsons, continues to dismiss the threats of upheaval with naive confidence. His own family is already paying for an early mistake, his fathering of an illegitimate son, Dominik. Dominik's mother is a Russian woman, a youthful infatuation named Natasha, whom Hein and his wife Marleen take into their home as a domestic.

In Mennotown, Hein's cousin, Jan Neufeld, continues to prosper, even as his wife Josephine throws thrift to the winds and spends recklessly among the moneylenders and "progressives" of Wichita. Faith is still supreme in Apanlee and Mennotown, but it begins to grow flabby and to fraternize with presumption.

Meanwhile unanchored intellectualism masquerades as discernment while seducing its victims in the Ukraine and in Kansas. The physically handicapped but bookish Uncle Benny, an illegitimate cousin to Hein, compensates for his physical deformity by addicting himself to reading. He also writes articles advocating radical reform.

Like many who choose to soar in the rarefied realm of abstract speculation detached from reality, Uncle Benny will help to unleash the forces of his own destruction. His counterpart and correspondent in America is Jan's wife Josephine, a woman also obsessed with book knowledge and scornful of the robust, rustic virtues of her husband and mother-in-law. With itching ears she lusts after every wind of doctrine, intoning the slogans of "equality," dressing in provocative new fashions, shocking her Christian neighbours by her intimacy with the money-lending Jews of Wichita and agitating on behalf of the suffragettes.

Josephine, however, is in America, and thus has the priceless opportunity to redeem herself, or at least find her senses, before it's too late.

The theme that it is already far too late runs throughout Lebensraum! - Book II like a telltale draft in Winter. If civilisation and decency are not to wilt and fade from the earth, those who uphold them must overcome manifest temptations and redeem the times.

Book II is a tragedy of errors. Some of the characters put up a valiant fight in the midst of horrendous conditions. Some, whose primary enemy lies within rather than without, succumb and yield the field to their ravenous antagonists.

We are reminded throughout this book that as men sow, they will also reap. The earthly wages of sin, however, are seldom apportioned in any logical or just form. That's because evil itself is neither logical nor just. It does, however, exact a toll. Its effects can sometimes be modified by subsequent reform and repentance, but as everyone in Apanlee and Mennotown knows, not even God can alter last year's harvest.

Much of Lebensraum! - Book II is a horror story. First, the Russian nation is knocked out of the war. Hein's illegitimate son Dominik, who has grown into a bitter, malevolent and amoral man, temporarily finds a purpose in the military defense of Russia. He ends up in prison and is eventually released upon the coming of the Red revolution. He joins with a group of desperados now feeding upon their country.

Resentful of his illegitimacy and the lack of love bestowed upon him in his childhood, Dominik leads his Red comrades to Apanlee and betrays its inhabitants. The new revolutionaries embark on a blood-soaked spree of unspeakable cruelty and terror. Among the dead is Hein himself, the grower of food murdered by hands that know only force and fury. Uncle Benny, whose own scarlet prose helped fan the fires of this onslaught, and his wife Dorothy are killed savagely.

Some do miraculously survive. Among those who live through the first wave of terror are Hein's wife Marleen, her twin sons Yuri and Sasha and her daughter Mimi. A cousin named Jonathan, grandson of the ill-fated Uncle Benny, manages to escape and takes up a life as an itinerant beggar. He will find his way to Germany and return to impose some justice on the hordes that have ransacked and bled his native Apanlee.

Much of the second book recounts the increasingly tight noose of terror that the communists wrap around Apanlee. Wanton shootings and deportations to Siberia begin to clear the land of the productive.

The Reds seek to grow bread by force and issue paper quotas to people forbidden to enjoy even the meager fruits that the blasted land will still yield. The commissars take a devilish delight in exercising arbitrary authority and in arresting people who have done nothing.

Apanlee is decimated, but Marleen, the twins and Mimi are able to hang on, partly because the flinty Natasha acts as a go-between with her son Dominik, now elevated to leadership of the collective.

Having betrayed his hometown to brutal beasts, Dominik becomes responsible for fulfilling the quotas for his Soviet masters. His "inheritance" of Apanlee is as illegitimate as he is. Terror, coercion and crude animal cleverness are his only tools.

The thugs and hooligans who rise to fill the ranks of the new party apparatus revel in their chance to dominate their betters and destroy them. People are taught slogans, as if demoralised, terrorized innocents are likely to be inspired by them. The

slogans, however, like everything else about the Soviets, are intended to cow and strike fear. In what must be deliberate and cynical irony, schoolchildren are taught to refer to the time of the tsars as that "before the revolution made us free."

In Mennotown the old Faith holds out longer against the new Freedom, but Josephine chafes and pouts under restrictions on her intellectual and social whims. Throughout their marriage, Jan has yielded to her and indulged her every wish. He wants a son, however. Their first son died in a freak winter accident and Josie gives birth to a succession of daughters.

Having reached the frontier of middle age, Josephine does not wish to venture another pregnancy. Jan, however, beginning to sense that his marriage is running out of control, has other ideas. Although Josephine will come to idolize her last-born, a son she nicknames Rarey, she will never forgive Jan for the importunate passion that leads to the lad's conception.

Josephine may be a thorn and a trial to Jan, but she is a comely one. She even makes efforts at halting her own slide into modernist depravity. Eventually, she admits that she fought the law of nature – and the law won.

In the meantime, a series of disasters dooms the once proud Jan Neufeld. His wife's expenditures pile on top of his own questionable credit purchases. Previous Neufelds would never have surrendered themselves to the lenders. The Donoghues have not retreated from their aims. The nascent labour movement draws them to itself and they begin to make escalating demands on their employer, Jan Neufeld.

One of Jan's mills is burnt, and suspicion hovers around the Donoghues. It turns out that Jan is not quite in step with modern times. He never bothered to take out the insurance policy on the mill.

Jan's consequent illness symbolizes the malaise and torpor of Western civilisation reeling on both sides of the Atlantic. The old verve is gone. He does seek temporary solace in the theology of the elder Dewey Epp, but to no avail. As Jan deteriorates, Josephine hitches her star to one more pipe dream, that of mov-

ing to California!

Eventually, Jan is reduced to seeking a loan – now federally subsidized and regulated. In a scene resonating with Randian overtones, Jan draws upon his last ounce of self-respect to negotiate a loan from the Donoghue now arrogantly ensconced at the bank.

The dialogue between a man who is still trying to do business in an honest, straightforward fashion and a moral degenerate who knows only how to function as a conduit of second-hand power is an eloquent summation of the rot that has eaten its way into the entrails of a once proud and independent country.

The scene with the Donoghue "bankster" is prelude to Jan's final fall. Throughout the years, he had turned his back on the firewater offered by his tippling friend Doctorjay. At this point, however, Jan has been broken by his pressing crown of woes. He gets drunk with Doctorjay and takes refuge in the hospitality of Dewey Epp's soup kitchen.

When Jan learns that even the alms he is reduced to accepting there are underwritten by Roosevelt and his raiders, the dam bursts. He shoots Dewey dead and ends up killing himself.

Lebensraum! - Book II is an unflinchingly honest portrayal of the early year's of this now hoary century. The aspirations that animated Peet Neufeld and his sons have been snuffed out in the hissing spittle of the architects of the New World Order. The price of joy is not even quoted amid this procession of market collapse, legalized looting, war, revolution and reigns of terror.

If the twentieth century's reflection makes us recoil in disgust, the fault lies not in those who have the historic facts, artistic vision, and courage to hold the glass up steadily. The thick miasma of despair that permeates Lebensrau!- Book II is scarcely dispelled by Doctorjay's drunken defiance of the "banksters" with which the book closes.

But it does show someone still has a spine.

Faith. Hope. Charity. Not even the ravages of Soviet Russia and social-welfare America can annihilate these. Faith hangs

on tenaciously in the face of ridicule and persecution. Charity is widely counterfeited, nowhere more piously than in America, where the Old Time Religion gets cozier by the day with Rooseveltian radicalism and sets up tax-subsidized soup kitchens with one hand and dispenses tracts with the other. Genuine charity manages to limp along in its own venerable, unspectacular way. The unflagging hospitality of Lizzie, the bonhomie of Doctorjay–even the mule-like loyalty of Natasha to Marleen and her kin stand out as coin of this realm.

And what of hope? What hope can survive the ruthless Russian bear allied with the crowns and republics of Europe and the languorous strength of America?

Ask a hungry urchin taken in by a stern and loving Hausfrau. Ask Marleen Neufeld, an emaciated prisoner in her own homeland. Ask the emaciated heirs and the ghosts of those who sowed and reaped, who built and nurtured Apanlee.

Their answers will be heard.

# Chapter 78

Shura had given birth to several gurgling Soviet citizens. She left them, swaddled, in Natasha's care while she stomped through the countryside, adroitly helping Dominik flush suspects out of hiding.

"His birthday falls on Papa Stalin's birthday," Dominik bragged, ogling his youngest with fatherly pride. He dipped his finger in a glass of vodka and let the baby suck on it. "A herdsman? *Nu?* Those times are past, and good riddance. A cobbler? A teacher? A judge? Maybe a tractorist?"

"A plumber. A fitter," sang Shura, who danced with the cat in her arms.

"We'll raise the fattest crops. We'll have the finest life," decided Dominik, and swung his latest offspring by his legs. The cork of a bottle flew into a corner. Moist kisses were shared all around. "A brand new tooth already? A little wolf cub? Eh?"

"Anything. A railroad clerk. A train conductor. Repairmen are in big demand—"

Natasha was not nearly as impressed. "Despite a silver saddle, no way to make a horse out of a donkey." She put her lips

right to the newborn's ears: "You should be so lucky, my birdling—"

Since no one told Natasha otherwise, she quietly kept her job. She was at home in the expanding nursery. She swaddled every one of them—the pig brigade children, the cow brigade children, the sugar beet children, even the cucumber children. She had a wide, warm lap in which to spoil each one, no matter what the season. The New World Order was of little interest to her. A baby was a baby; all wanted to be loved. She kept on burping them and swaddling them so she could handle them as though they were bundles of logs. She had not shelved her skills. She pinched them in different places to make sure that the flesh was as firm as it looked.

Natasha was still the old Apanlee Baba who, in her wanton youth, had served the favored subjects of the tsars—dusting windows, stoking fires, shooing flies and making sure the measles didn't settle on her babies' vulnerable brains.

It was an uphill struggle running Apanlee as Dominik saw fit and as the quota laws dictated, but as the decade puckered to a cheerless close and trouble piled on trouble, he summoned the twins to the kitchen. He made them sit down by the fire. They saw he was saving his anger.

"I need to have a chat with you. Why not be friends? I promise not to lose my temper. We're all in this together, nu? Might there be anything that I can do for you?"

"No. Not a thing."

"If only you and I—"

"We hear you're doing splendidly. Your quotas are the envy of the Party."

He knew what he knew: they were burning with wrath. He knew they were plotting escape. He knew their veiled, accusatory eyes, their sanctimonious ways. He knew, specifically, that what the twins withheld did not lie buried under stumps and stones. They were the passive creed. Their tempers were controlled. Not one of them would have engaged in open sabotage. They

didn't slash his feather beds so that the feathers flew. They knew how to bridle their tongues.

Those two ate their supper in silence. They went to bed in silence.

He watched them from afar. He watched them, day by day.

No matter what the lure, the twins said nothing, shrugged their shoulders, looked at him, looked at each other; it was as if he spoke to iron and to stone.

"The posters tell you to obey," cried Dominik, repeatedly, but Marleen shook her head. She did so even when he coaxed: "I'll give you extra ration cards—" She held her pride aloft. When she stood patiently in endless queues to trade her meager ration cards, she always respected the line.

She now told Dominik, while picking out a seam: "You know the quota rules. Since I don't work for you, how can I qualify for any extra favors?"

"You need a horse to help you plow the plot the government has allocated you. I'll happily rent it to you for a pittance—"

"No. I don't need your horse."

"I'll throw in a few extra chickens—"

"Five travel papers," said Marleen.

He chewed his lower lip. He knew the clan. They wouldn't separate. Whom would they leave behind? He offered carefully: "I could arrange for two."

"Five. Properly endorsed."

"I can't. If I did that, I'd be as good as dead!"

She looked at him and smiled the thinnest smile. She took her time before she spoke. "We used to say before the Revolution set us free: 'He who laughs last, laughs best.'"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Your quota problems will not go away." She spoke so softly that no passersby could hear: "I'll wait for things to change. For He hath promised us—"

Her bread was dry. Her soup was thin. Her Faith was of iron and steel. Her prayers were stronger than slogans.

While Marleen and her decimated family walked barefoot through the mud of yet another soggy spring, Natasha would sneak furtively to Hein's collapsing grave and pat the earth to a neat mound. She did that still. She went there out of habit. Marleen no longer did.

Natasha hunched, a grieving shadow, amid the brambles and the weeds. She thought: "My love was like a stubble field. But now? My heart, a stony cave."

Within her heart, she could no longer see Hein's features clearly, but yet she spoke to him. "He is our son," she grieved, obliging something deep within. She felt she must report to him for reasons only dimly understood and nowhere properly explained. "What did your people do? Where have your people failed? An icicle is forming on my heart—"

In vain, she tried to find some guidance and direction while carving simple arguments.

"He is a human being, too," she told her martyred love. "It is my fault. It can't be otherwise. I shouldn't have weaned him when it was hot—"

She listened. Not a sound.

The wrinkles on her face and neck stretched from the effort of her concentration. Thus, she would sit and try to sort it out, snatching at young dreams that wafted through her heart like shadows.

"Far better it be Dominik—" she said, and then fell silent.

When she could breathe again, she said she was a Baba and was glad—yes, glad!—that Shura was producing babies, for babies were still innocent; she had her way with them; she tried to teach them manners.

Far better it be Dominik, she told the shadows next, than someone out of Moscow.

That's where the Devil squatted, with thick legs and a camel's nose, dispatching operatives. The evidence was everywhere. An odious citizen was now in charge at the collective farm once known as Peter Friesen's farm, a man so vile, so vicious, so loyal

to the Party line that he squashed every Friesen freckle as though it were a roach.

Natasha moved her lips. "I'll do the best I can. I still have spoons left in hiding—"

No one's spoons in the entire neighborhood had such ornate design. No silver had that sheen. In olden days, Natasha liked to show it off, the silverware of Apanlee; it was her pride and joy. For quite a while, those spoons were gone, it was assumed the anarchists had stolen them, but then, one lucky afternoon, Natasha had unearthed them within the rubble of a caved-in building in the back of the estate, and that same night, Natasha took them back and gave them to Marleen. "Let's hide them," said Natasha.

Together, they had hidden them behind a broken staircase where no one ever looked. Natasha's special patron saint was hidden there as well, just gathering up dust.

She told the skeleton beneath the mound of earth: "I still have fourteen left. Marleen knows where they are. If worst should come to worst, she can fall back on them."

She rose on shaky knees. She would sneak silver spoon by silver spoon out to the barter market, and sneak Marleen the money. That was her reasoning.

She placed both arms around the tree that still oozed sap across the letters Hein had hewed into the old bark. She thought her heart would break.

Natasha crossed herself in secrecy when she was told that, to fulfill the quota lists, instead of growing grain, Dominik had now decided cleverly to specialize in poultry.

She cornered her son the next morning to give him a piece of her mind. "Have you lost your head? You can't tell a goose from a gander."

He glared at her. "That is defeatist talk."

Natasha moved a little closer, so she could elbow Dominik at intervals. "No doubt some Gypsy laid a curse on you. Unless I quickly call the twins and bribe them to assist you with good advice and prayers—"

"We're done with that. We're done with superstition. All that was yesterday."

She kept clutching her belly with laughter. "*Ach ja! Ach ja!* The olden days! The wicked days! In past years, by this time, Hein Neufeld's wheat stood four feet tall."

It galled. His solace was his vodka. Even then, there was plenty of vodka in Russia. It made him feel sleepy and warm. It blurred all his troubles, of which he had a barrelful.

Last year, the crops had browned because he planted them too early; the year before they shriveled in the sun because he planted them too late. This year, he hadn't even plowed. He had no choice left over except to specialize in fowl. Shura had already hatched a perfect set of ducklings in a crate beneath the oven bench, which proved his methods had merit. But she forgot to put a cover over them, and in the morning they were gone. She blamed it on the cat.

Natasha was relentless in pursuit. She planted herself in his path. "You're gambling on your luck. I know someone who slumped against the barn just yesterday and did not rise again."

"Be quiet! Now!"

"How will you feed your ducks? Your geese? Your chickens? Hah! Can an alligator fly? Can Comrade Stalin touch the sun? A duck must feed on barley. A goose must peck on rye. Chickens feed best on wheat. Where is your grain, *tovarich*?"

"Don't talk like that. That's undermining our will to reconstruct the government—"

She stood before him, feet apart. "The fools of God," Natasha yelled as loudly as she could, "know how to double the government harvest. Why don't you calm yourself enough to treat them properly? The soil is whispering to them. Did I not teach you manners?"

"No. I said no."

"A boil on your backside," she shouted. She sat down on an overturned bucket and started peeling a potato with Marleen's peeling knife. That knife cut perfect spirals; they curled into her lap. She started sobbing softly. "Why don't you listen to your

mother? If you don't listen to your mother, they'll come and shoot you dead."

"I serve the Soviet government. I cannot wear two hats."

Which was as good an argument as any.

At Apanlee, state workers came and went. Things went from bad to worse.

When it was clear to Dominik his quota problems would not go away, he tried another strategy. He doled out, even-handedly, symbolic favors on one hand and venomous retaliation on the other.

Those workers who excelled the quota charts received a gleaming coin to wear around the neck for aiding in the reconstructive efforts of the country, while slackers, loafers and defeatists, caught sitting idly on an empty pail, inventing lulls to break the day's monotony, could expect being sent, without ado, into the nearest prison camp. Few ever reappeared.

When that did not suffice to fill the quota charts, he made sure pay was handed out in kilos of black bread. The useless priests had long since been hanged or driven out of town, but they had left behind their holy days; the moment Sunday came, the men refused to spade; the women wouldn't even thread a needle.

Things went from bad to worse. Around him there were many angry faces.

"We'll throw you into trucks and move you to the north. We'll ship you to Siberia like cattle!" yelled Dominik.

He learned he had to second-guess the spies and deviationists. He kept on tightening the noose. He understood the Germans' anger, their ire, their passivity. They had owned much. Now they were poor. No wonder they withdrew into their sullen silences.

But his own kin? The brothers of his bloodline? His comrades who had helped install the cataclysmic New World Order? He had expected gratitude. He had counted on finding agreeable people.

All that in vain.They refused to enlist in the battle.

The native workers he recruited painfully by way of bribes and threats remained tardy and sluggish and sullen. They quit their tasks without asking permission, thus showing no allegiance to their country, now freed from the exploiters, as he reminded them. They even challenged him. "Just different chains, *tovarich.* Different chains."

"What do you mean?"

We're chattel. Merely chattel. What is the use of trying?"

"The dungeons will teach you obedience," he threatened. Impatiently, he'd hit them with his walking stick, but they refused to move.

He knew they hated him. They praised him to his face and mocked him to his back. "What for, comrade? What for?" the listless peasants asked.

Too many, still, lay helpless in their huts with swollen limbs and muted eyes and shook their heads when prodded, no matter how he goaded them, perspiring with the effort. The moment when he turned his back, they ripped his quota list.

This one and that one would say to no one in particular: "They came for my last son already—" and silence would fall after their words.

A dead son was a dead son; you had to dig his grave.

Dominik was sure that treachery was everywhere, in need of being stripped, but in the meantime, there were quotas.

More quotas. Yet more quotas.

The Party sent its target goals on reams of yellow paper which Dominik nailed every Monday to the doors of all the barns. Alas, most field hands could not read; to them, his quota lists meant nothing.

And neither did his medals. And neither did his threats.

Before his eyes, the place fell into disrepair. The trough from which the horses drank was never swept or scrubbed. The flies made a thick rim.

He knew his time was short. He wished that he had paid

attention in the bygone, olden days to the repair and maintenance of farm machinery the Germans used to run, but he had not; he had preferred to roam the countryside instead of buckling down to work. The harvesters sat rusting in the shed. The tractors all stood idle. It rained on them. It snowed on them. A hole had formed in the roof; part of the shed had already caved in. For a while, tramps housed in the abandoned edifice; they scribbled Soviet slogans on the wall and tore the floor up to warm themselves in winter.

"I will arrange to fix both roof and floor next week," said Dominik, but later he forgot.

When yet another spring pushed through the loam, Natasha wailed, pursuing him: "The calendar confuses you? Why don't you ask the twins?"

"I can't trust them. Would you?"

"What on earth are you going to do?"

Natasha was a human wishbone, cleaved sorely by her loyalties. She was at her wits' ends. She watched him pulling at a hangnail. He bit it off. He stained his lips with his own blood. He said: "Just wait and see."

Natasha never saw a claw so nakedly unsheathed.

The Germans in Natasha's hut were now as quiet as a nest of mice. They didn't bother anyone. They just kept to themselves.

"A galling creed," said Dominik, still in the Party's good graces.

He leaned into Marleen: "See this red rubber stamp I hold here, in my hand? I'm striking every quarrel."

She merely shrugged and stared.

"Your sons can ride our tractors. Larissa can help Shura feed the horses in the morning, and in the afternoon, why not help Baba in the nursery where it is clean and cool?"

"Why would I want to interfere with progress?" Marleen asked in an icy voice.

Dominik choked down his wrath. He chose to let that pass.

Instead he said: "You're getting old, and picking beans is

hard on back and spine—"

"I'll manage, Dominik. And I will watch you manage."

The twins slept in the loft. Larissa and Mimi shared a little makeshift corner, partitioned by a blanket. The girls were almost sisters, taking turns at chores, teaming up at finding scraps of food that fell from the government wagons.

They all made do with their diminished riches: a bed, a table, a trunk, two chairs. A miracle produced a box of nails. Strong poles propped up the sagging roof. Marleen, Larissa and the Pioneer had thatched it skillfully with reedy grass, and it held firm against the rain. The twins had built a bench that ran around the oven; Marleen spread over it a threadbare quilt Natasha sneaked into the hut while Shura took a nap.

Natasha often visited. She never came with empty hands. Her apron bulging with goods she hamstered cleverly when Shura wasn't looking.

Marleen was always glad to have Natasha near. She told her without irony: "Come in. Come in. And make yourself at home."

"Well. Only for a little while," Natasha whispered modestly, while wringing her raw hands.

"No. No. Sit down. Here, Baba. By the fire."

"A little while. That's all." Natasha pulled a bunch of carrots from the folds of her patched skirt and gave them to Marleen. "Here! Here's a little something for the heart. Don't ask, and you won't know—"

"I thank you," said Marleen, by then not only gray but white.

Natasha shuffled awkwardly. "It's nothing. Really. Nothing."

Marleen, while finishing a mitten, secured the last firm loop, before she had an answer. "Well, you surprised a lot of folks—"

Natasha flushed as though she had been suddenly caressed. "Leftovers. That's all."

She helped Marleen stuff several chinks with crumpled paper to keep the warmth in during nights and keep the stray cats out.

"And you surprised a lot of people, too," she told Marleen, glancing at the floor, swept spotless, strewn with clean, wet sand.

"It isn't yet everyday's evening. I'm proud they cannot break my spirit."

"No one can," the former servant said. There was a pause. It stretched and stretched.

"You wouldn't be so foolish?" Natasha said at last. "Take my advice. The night has eyes and ears."

Marleen just kept her silence.

"Please don't. A small mistake will be considered major sabotage—"

"We have no choice. It has already been decided."

They sat for a a long while in silence, until Natasha sighed: "*Ach ja. Ach ja.* And yet, it was like paradise—"

Their glances met and held. There was no film between them.

"And now?" Natasha said with a small sob: "Your life as well as mine, as sad as a cold supper."

"Don't worry about us. There is no choice. You know that. Here. See this? This is a map. Here's what we're going to do—"

Natasha's face turned the hues of a painter's palette as Marleen whispered details of escape across the wilds of Asia—details that were alarming.

Within the circle of the smoking wick, the twins sat, hatching plans, their ears alert for outside footsteps. Larissa gnawed at her lips as she stitched away by the light of a wick. "Time flies," she said, while struggling with a lump, deep in her throat, that would not go away. "And planting time won't wait." Last week, she'd lined a half-charred crate to make a sewing box. In it, she stored her darning bulb, her sewing needle cushion, eleven buttons, and some threads. Natasha knew, but Dominik did not: it had a double bottom. There she had hidden the Gospel.

"We count on Him," she whispered. The twins surrounded every thought with confirmation and support. They whispered to each other that, with the good Lord's help, they would attempt a break for freedom—somehow! soon!—perhaps as early as next

week!

Years fled before they tried.

At first, it had seemed easy: just give commands and watch them work! But soon the German tools lay idle in the fields.

To say that this was maddening for Dominik was putting it politely. Just how to run the confiscated farm machinery with the Ukrainian field hands only who had never learned to farm beyond the hoe? How could he fix the shed if someone lost his hammer? What could he do if someone stole the newborn calf, the pride of Comrade Stalin, and hid it in the meadows? He flogged the plow horse without mercy; it sank down in the mud, where it died. He ran to get an ox to pull the harvester out of the ditch, where it had gotten stuck; the beast stepped on his toe; the nail turned black and then fell off; his foot became badly infected.

He found himself bed-ridden, alone with his venomous thoughts. His insides churned and rumbled. He clutched one of the clan's ornately cross-stitched pillows tightly to himself to seek relief until he noticed, with a little jolt, a faint trace of the scent that Dorothy had worn.

He flung it in a corner. No one picked it up. It was soon full of fleas.

When Dominik could walk again, he found to his dismay that all his apple trees had been attacked by scabs. Someone had forgotten to spray them with the suds left over from a wash. The orchard yield was ruined.

Next, a mysterious fire swept through his stable and burned a huge hole in the ceiling. He ordered his entire crew to patch the roof, which took three weeks of work, which was the reason why he missed fulfilling his important quota list and could not document his productivity.

As the first Five-Year-Plan came to a cheerless close and everybody's worries worsened, both Dominik and Shura grew ever more aggressive.

The two were never idle. They spread fear like a net.

Here was a couple made to match each other's bag of tricks with tricks and yet more tricks. They knew how to focus the agents' attention on others.

"It's all the Germans' fault."

"Well. Well. And who's in charge?" the grain inspectors asked, and would not go away. "Is it not Dominik? We seem to have a problem."

"But nothing that can't be solved."

They kept on dropping in at Apanlee at frequent intervals, and some of them were nice enough, while most of them were not.

"The quotas still are lagging badly."

Dominik sat with his chair tilted back against the wall to show them he felt nonchalant. "We'll work a ten-day week. That way, we'll double output."

The grain inspectors only shrugged to show their ill-concealed contempt. "Yes. Do that, Comrade. Do that. Well, all the best of luck." They gave each other fleeting smiles. "If this keeps up, someone will be looking for his teeth," they told each other gleefully. "Might it be Dominik?"

"Next year will surely—"

The quota agents showed no mercy. "Don't talk about the future! Now! The present is what counts."

"But I—"

"More cabbage. Carrots. Cucumbers."

They prodded Dominik at every opportunity as though he were an ox. No matter how he tabulated every working hour—overtime, and weekend hours in the bargain!—how sagely he projected every deadline, the quota shortage grew more threatening as spring turned into summer and summer into fall.

He drank. He cursed. He swore. His quota problems worsened.

The steam-driven threshers, idle for years, mysteriously lost wires and bolts. Workers fell ill when the workload was greatest,

and thieves intent on wrecking the economy stole parts from crucial farm machinery. Faceless defeatists and diversionists, he told the quota agents when they came early the next week to double-check, with more stern words for him, had rolled themselves corn cigarettes and thrown the butts into the brittle straw of Apanlee. He pointed out to them: "Look at that huge, charred barn! You draw your own conclusions."

The formula was simple: he needed scapegoats now. He knew they hated him, the blighted Germans, all of them! They hated him more than the sullen native workers even, whom he kept flushing out from their Ukrainian huts. Thus, it was only natural that he would blame the mute recalcitrants, the prayer creed, now burrowed deep into the earth like moles.

He knew they huddled over secret plans and whispered of deliverance. He told his mother angrily: "I'll break their spirit yet—"

"You pushed them out."

Why blame the twins? That was Natasha's attitude. The dimpled babies she had nursed were two gaunt graylings now, bent, hunched, deep furrows on their foreheads—between them, still Larissa. She knew their hearts burned at the sight of her. Her face was wet with tears.

Soon, it was clear to all that Dominik had bitten off much more than he could chew. He was in a bad fix.

The spring days were racing on; something had to be grown. But what? He had run out of seed. He no longer believed he could manage and pull off a production miracle. He faced each day with dread. And in the meantime, it was quotas. Quotas. Quotas. And more quotas.

Quotas on the ducks.

Quotas on the horses.

Quotas even on the goats that ate the few forget-me-nots still struggling in the meadows.

And it was quotas also on the beans, cucumbers, carrots, melons, onions, and potatoes, and quotas even on the radishes

that already swarmed with worms.

Misfortunes multiplied. Natasha chased Shura around with a broom.

He issued every kind of order.

Disorder kept on growing.

Another season came and went. The chickens scratched at the dust in the yard. The twins no longer spoke to Dominik, nor did Marleen, and neither did Larissa.

The only one who still smiled prettily was Mimi. The Pioneer was bettering her opportunities. She gave him lots of tips. She was his go-between. He liked her well enough. She was one of the few recalcitrants, decided Dominik, whom he could trust implicitly.

"Come in. Come in. Sit down here by my side."

She was quite tall, and lissome as a lizard; her eyes were now level with his. "What do you want, *tovarich*?"

"What do you mean, what do I want? I want a little chat."

She lingered by the door. She kept up her distance from him. "Why did you call? So bright and early?"

"There's talk of flight. Tell me it's not true."

She listened, smilingly, as though he told a joke. She knew that she was pretty.

"Out with the truth."

"You must be joking, surely. I don't know what you mean." He often told her Soviet jokes; she topped them with her own. He sometimes tried to pinch her cheek when Shura didn't look.

Now Dominik leaned back and blew a blue tobacco ring that slowly vanished by the window. "Don't play the innocent. This letter came this morning."

She took it, straightening the creases. "It is for you, *tovarich*. Why are you giving it to me?"

He studied her in silence. She was a German youngster but trying hard to please; she seconded his words; she strained to overcome the stains of landed ancestry.

He shifted strategies. "How's school?"

"Fine. Nothing but fives. Check with the teacher." She stood

on tiptoes, practically. She squinted to read his intentions. "Why do you ask? Why did you call me in?"

He knew her record was impeccable. She was first in knee bends, second in frog jumps. She was always the first to hand in her papers, and her folder charted remarkable ideological growth.

"What did you learn in school last week?"

"I learned a useful proverb," she told him evenly. "If you take credit for the rain, be prepared to take blame for the drought."

"Ha! Very funny. Very funny."

"Do you want me to read you that letter, *tovarich*?"

"You might as well. Why don't you open it?"

She read the letter slowly to herself before she cleared her throat. "More quotas, Dominik."

He picked up a thick sheaf of papers. He said to the sunshine outside: "How? How? Will someone tell me how?"

Her young eyes glittered merrily. "Maybe I know a way? They want their travel papers."

His face turned a bright red. She stood there, waiting in silence.

"Need I tell you," he said slowly, "that that's a most seditious, dangerous remark? I am surprised at you. I am amazed and shocked."

She didn't back away. "No one doubts my loyalty. I belong to the hammer and sickle."

"Then you know better than to ask what you just asked of me. For that, I could be shot."

"I only told you what they want. I didn't—"

"Yes?"

"I didn't ask you to cooperate."

He cast a sly, admiring glance. "It's travel papers, eh?"

"These days, a set of travel papers is more precious than a nugget." She lifted one smooth eyebrow. "They say you have connections. It's whom you know that counts."

His grin spread ear to ear. "That's right. It's whom I know that counts."

"My brothers think you have a friend who has a friend who

knows the back door to escape and who could easily—"

"It's their hide, too. If they are caught, they will be shot."

"They won't be caught. You'll see to that. Right, Dominik?"

"And you?"

Her tongue was smooth as ballerina's silk, by then a memory. "I know my brothers well. They keep their word. They'll come and work for you and help you with your quotas if they believe that you will help them get their travel papers in good time. Your quotas will be photographed and written up in *Pravda.*"

He slapped her on the shoulder. "Smart girl. Smart girl. Now tell me this. What do you want? What's in this plan for you?"

"A job as your right hand. As your translator, Dominik."

"But why?"

" I speak High German. Low German. Russian. Ukrainian. I'll work right by your side so I can help rebuild the wasted country we both love—"

"You'll get it. Here's my hand."

She did not flinch. She did not blush. She watched him smack his lips as though he were chewing a slice of fat bacon. She was about to leave, pleased with herself, when he leaned forward, suddenly.

"Oh. One last thing. You tell your brothers that I asked: 'How can I get Larissa, in addition, to lift her skirt for me?'"

"You just lost one fine opportunity," said Mimi, smiling sunnily while walking out the door.

# Chapter 79

Dominik felt panic rise as the agents pushed his quotas even higher the next year and the anticipated bounty from the soil of Apanlee still lagged behind to a degree that drove the beads of perspiration to his forehead.

"More fear. More fear to break their spirits," he told his mother, slurping borscht.

"You're not ashamed?"

"Why should I be? Crop-wreckers, all! All of them! All! That's what I will report. That's how they'll see the light. They'll learn their lesson yet."

"That's where you're wrong. The Germans are fastidious. They would not dream of soiling their own nest—"

"You always take their side."

Natasha gathered firewood while rubbing at her eyes and pondering her means. "You are my son. Why would I do that, Dominik?"

He scowled at her. The problem was more complicated than she knew. In tsarist days, the Devil took convenient blame for every misfortune. Now even that had changed. Now culprits

must be found. Culprits were more valuable than even glutted quotas.

Dominik began to grasp this useful principle as the proletariat rose ever higher to the top, and the once-privileged sank ever deeper to the bottom. As long as he found culprits on whom to fix all blame, he was safe from being accused.

He learned his tactics well. As he had tyrannized the cats while growing up, so now he tyrannized the neighborhood.

"Four others have confessed, been tried, and shot at dawn," said Dominik, while sitting close to Shura.

"The State knows best," said Shura. She curled against him wordlessly. She, too, was garnering herself a useful reputation. A belt was trailing from a sling. She used it now and then on workers who displeased her.

To stay in the Party's good graces, Dominik took care to demonstrate his loyalty to Soviet Russia in every way he could. The government inspectors gave him several useful formulas that would bring glory to the proletariat, but all production had slowed to a trickle. Therefore, he not merely followed the rumors, he planted a few of his own.

He did that with a tongue that grew as facile as a snake's. It hissed of German hate crimes. This was a brand new term, amazingly efficient.

He claimed in meeting after meeting that cunning saboteurs surrounding him stole crucial farm machinery to undermine the brotherhood of proletarians.

"I'll do what must be done," said Dominik whose eyes were two live coals. "I will not spare my enemies. Why should I spare my enemies? They're scum. They are the worst. We must get rid of them. Is there an argument?"

He nagged his mother day and night: "Why don't you tell them that?"

"I cannot help it, Dominik," she pointed out, this for the hundredth time, "how I remember them when they were small and suckled on the honey water I would prepare for them before

Marleen's fine beehives were destroyed. So cute. So sweet. So clean."

The twins were now his thorniest obstacle. He had made sure that they attended several public meetings at which hate crimes were patriotically discussed, but it made little difference; they just exchanged their glances.

He ached to clip their prayers' wings. He itched to smash their Faith.

"The Congress of the Peasants has declared that servants of religious cults are using up the food of worthy working men," he scolded them, vociferous.

They did not answer back. They never argued anything. They merely watched while quotas piled on quotas.

He knew that they were not alone; somewhere in every German homestead, there was that old-time Bible from which they ladled strength. He knew the twins had, on the sly, by the light of a small wick, thumbed through theirs many times—so fervently, in fact, surmised an aggravated Dominik, that chances were the spine was coming loose. It nurtured them, and it replenished them. But where could it be found?

His eyes were expressionless. "The Cheka will teach them respect."

Natasha ran and hid her last remaining icon.

Five neighbors disappeared without a trace, and Apanlee lay quiet as a grave.

"See? There's a lesson here," insisted Dominik, who read the wrecking spirit in every freckled face. "Somebody, somewhere will get hurt. It's time that that's spelled out."

Soon afterwards, he tried to argue with Marleen. "Why live in fear? Why don't you mark my calendars to keep me organized?"

She raised both hands in feeble protest. "My methods are old-fashioned."

He targeted the twins to pry their harvest secrets out of them. When he demanded answers, they claimed they'd lost their voices.

When he harangued them angrily for salient specifics, they shrugged, pretending they were deaf.

By then, the will that had been sapped by hunger had returned. They knew that shadows passed beneath their windows, but they blew out the wick.

Of all the instruments of fear to usher in the New World Order, the Cheka was the worst, and hate crimes were its means. Faceless and terrifying was the Cheka. It had a thousand eyes and ears. And it was everywhere.

It peered through the shutters to where Larissa sat, stitching. On soundless soles, it followed Marleen. Her neighbors. Her friends. It clung to the heels of the twins. It grew by what he fed on—fear, fear, and yet more fear.

Suspects were caught repeatedly and punished savagely and spirited away, but others kept on burrowing. He knew that for a fact. He blamed them for every woe.

"They'll learn their lesson yet!" he said to Shura, furious. He knew a brute tenacity was there. He sensed it in the rustling of the straw. He knew, by then, that his own head was on the block: he was the man in charge.

Shura picked herself a wormy cherry. The red juice bubbled in the corners of her mouth. "You are still just the family bastard?"

"As though it happened yesterday."

This was for Dominik an open, running sore that would not heal. He claimed repeatedly: "Those who dare speak against the government will soon be silenced. All of them. Those who reject our reconstructive efforts for the land will soon be dead—perhaps tomorrow." The result was the fifth meager crop in a row.

The grain inspectors came to check. They stepped around the twins and asked each other angrily: "Where's Comrade Dominik?"

"Your quota lists fall short," the government inspectors growled at Dominik, no longer genial, and he was glad when

they departed; in fact, he shook all day.

While helping them atop their donkey carts and trembling in his trousers, he promised them that next year would be better; he would make sure; he had done trial runs with several crop varieties and now he knew the secret, finally, of growing stronger strains.

"The weather has been bad," he argued, trembling badly. "How could that be my fault?"

The heavens mutinied. It wasn't just incompetence and sabotage. Untimely rains had virtually destroyed the winter wheat; then came the heat; the bean crop, too, was pitiful. The barley yield was worse. The cucumbers had worms. The melons dried and shriveled.

No matter how he tallied every sack and basket on the old wooden abacus he found one afternoon in Uncle Benny's study, his output fell short of the goal. With flying hands, he oiled it so that the smooth pegs flew and added everything to doublecheck, but still, he came out short.

He could not fill his quotas.

When next the quota agents came, he spit in an impressive arc. "I'll punish them often," he told them. "To keep them in line."

"Do that, and more," they said. "Shoot one in ten. To warn the nine remaining. We like our numbers round." They drank to the progressive meeting.

"Just so the rules are clear," the quota agents said to Dominik when they returned a few days hence to doublecheck his plans to increase productivity. They spoke in warning undertones. "Try harder, Citizen. The rope is short. Just so you understand—"

"I do."

"And spare us your excuses—"

"I will. I will. In fact, I will—" said Dominik, who talked incessantly but tried to hide his hands. His stomach kept on acting up long after they were gone.

All night long, it was journey after journey to the outhouse.

Four of the German heads of family in the vicinity of Apanlee were tried and sentenced publicly and shot for grave and harmful insubordination. The paper wrote them up, spilling gallons of ink in the process.

"—the German kulak Peters—"

"—the German kulak Ens—"

The papers grew more vicious in their editorials about the struggle of the classes. They shamed the Germans openly by name long after the cold earth had swallowed them.

"—the German kulak Unruh—"

"—the German kulak Toews—"

Thus died the Thiessen males in their entirety. Thus died the males of Warkentin. Five sons of Johann Loewen were pulled from their beds and shot. And those who had survived from the once prosperous and robust Reimer boys who used to frolick barefoot in the snow in happier days were lined up without words and shot.

The bullets flew. Nobody knows how many.

Natasha mourned them silently. She knew them, face by face.

She had been loaned to them from Apanlee, back in her youth, to help them with festivities. She still had memories she cherished—of Christmas, Easter, birthdays, soft Sunday afternoons when neighbors gathered, gossiping for hours, thus keeping sins in check. Her eyes would moisten with emotion, remembering.

How restful and relaxed life seemed in those long-bygone days as they sat—kulaks all, admittedly, proud of their past, fat with accomplishments and confident the future would be rich—just visiting with friends and relatives, sipping their fragrant tea and dunking fluffy zwieback.

Their crime?

Hate laws in detail spelled them out.

As documented in quadruplicates, they had served self-same tea and zwieback fourteen times to foreigners, friends from the city of the tsars, St. Petersburg, now renamed Leningrad. There,

they had blasphemied. Those Sunday afternoons proved their undoing. The bullets flew. The relatives despaired. The graves were shoveled shut, and for a while, the wailing wouldn't stop, but then a silence came that was unlike most any silence of the past: a deep, pervasive hush.

More and more citizens of the Soviet began to disappear mysteriously; not just the Germans, others, too, but almost all of them. Somebody came and took them, one by one, without a word, without an explanation—and there was nothing in the night that swallowed flesh and spit out bones but the low howling of the wind along a road that led straight off to nowhere.

The Cheka wove its subtle web. Its secret agents multiplied.

The Germans disappeared. By the hundreds of thousands, they vanished. Where is their monument?

Why those of Apanlee were spared when practically everybody else was sacrificed as hate crimes hardened in the laws of Soviet Russia and ethnic cleansing climaxed and more and more were shot or spirited away, is still in many minds a question mark.

The answer was at hand, and it was Dominik. He knew he needed them.

"Can we afford to miss the quota lists?" asked Shura, too, now white with fear.

"We can't," said Dominik. "It's them or us. That's the bottom line."

The oil lamps flickered dimly. Black trains moved over broken rails. The frosts browned the sugar beets badly. The winds refused to blow. The windmills wouldn't pump water. The country had run itself dry. The cranes stood idle; no stores had anything for sale. All through the countryside, decay and beggary ruled, though the slogans were braver than ever. Asthmatic locomotives pulled rusty rows of wagons past sagging, run-down barracks, and what went on inside those closely guarded barracks was anybody's guess.

It must be said of Dominik: he wasn't at the source; he was a willing toady. And terror was his means. Unrestrained terror—

raw, naked terror, crouching in the basement, peering from the ceiling. Now it was terror morning, noon, and night—and terror! terror! yet more terror! All cowered under it—the twins, Marleen, Larissa, Mimi. Natasha felt it, too; her own son spelled it out for her—how hatemongers must suffer, and hate crimes must be punished.

But she was old, one foot already in the grave. She spoke her mind, no matter what. He was her Dominik. She told him many times, to let her words sink in:

"Why don't you treat them fittingly? To have them on your side?"

He stared at her, his eyes expressionless.

"I could arrange for little favors," wept his mother.

To no avail at all!

She kept up her lament: "I pity you. I fear for you. The quota agents know no mercy—"

"It is too late. It's them or me. It's better that they grasp that."

She watched how the neighborhood vanished. Hatemongers all! Against the New World Order! The Party's wrath kept sweeping them away like chaff before the wind. Good neighbors she had known for all her life would disappear behind some flapping doors, and that was that; that was the end; no one heard of them again; not even roosters crowed.

Her son had this to say: "You tell them this. Their troubles are bigger than mountains." He kept on pushing up his sleeves and pointing to his biceps. "All who are guilty now of hate crimes will be punished. It matters not if there's no evidence."

"Have tea with us," urged Shura when the quota agents came to Apanlee soon afterwards, with bayonetted rifles on their shoulders. The agents handed Dominik a list. He surveyed it with narrowed eyes.

"Shoot one in five," the quota agents said this time. "To warn the four remaining."

No trick to have a man shot at dawn. A body slumped. A

sparrow chirped. The net of the Cheka was tight and grew tighter, ensnaring the living along with the dead. The Cheka sorted, labeled and sent home the victims' bloodstained clothes.

All this took place well within living memory.

What was a life? Or, for that matter, what was death, no longer catalogued? Someone would come with a bucket of sand and throw it over the red, sticky puddle.

Natasha watched it all. Wringing her hands made no difference. Marleen gave her tears to the earth. The spring-sowing barley campaign was now underway: the twins still held back what they knew.

They listened to the tread of terror on the cobblestones that led to Apanlee and knew that when they came and took this one away, that one away, a silence fell after they left.

All this went on for years. At night, the bullets crackled. The Holocaust? Don't mention that to Mimi as she sits on the Kansas couch, still part of the Old World.

She, Mimi, knows about the Holocaust. She knows her facts: on silent orders, silent men pulled silent people from their beds and shot them in the Germans' orchards.

"And many of the executioners," she will tell you to set the record straight, "had gold and silver in their names. Thus died the German farmer Hiebert, for example—"

The crime for which he died in agony? Concealment of the Bible. Forbidden political print.

The hate laws spelled that out. The hate laws were extremely specific, containing many paragraphs.

Yes, it was true, the farmer Hiebert stammered. He tried to hide the Gospel; it was his most precious possession. It had been brought from the Vistula Plains; it had been in the Hiebert family for seven generations.

He tried to argue precedent and history when Dominik discovered it, well-hidden in the straw. But Dominik just sneered.

"Here is the evidence," he said, "to document imperialist leanings. The Party will be pleased."

The execution squad did not loose time. The German farmer Hiebert fell, as others fell that year, and in the years to come, and did not rise again.

The German farmer Siemens.

A dogged deacon of the Lutherans, this man had stung the bastard's backside once for stealing unripe apples. Now Dominik prodded his buttocks, in turn, at intervals, and with the muzzle of a rifle, in Uncle Benny's study, where he was camping now.

"Confess. Beg for reprieve. You know it's as easy to beg as to steal—"

The shackled man, by then, had turned into a crumbling fortress. "Tell me what I'm accused of having done. I will confess to anything. Kill me but spare my children—"

"You don't remember on your own? Well, *donnerwetter!* Fancy that."

"Have mercy, Dominik. Let me take all the punishment, but leave my family alone."

His tormenter smirked gleefully. What family was left?

All of his sons except for one had long since disappeared in the realm of ice and snow; the last one still hid out, behind a pile of burlap sacks. He, Dominik, had that from a good source.

"*Tovarich*, for the love of Stalin—"

"Not for the love of Stalin, but for the fear of Stalin," corrected a stern Dominik. "Spare me your groveling. I have here, filed already, the testimony of a dozen people who all remember clearly—"

The German Bauer, likewise.

Some twenty years ago he had applied for passports for his family. He had wanted to move them to Kansas. A van came and took them away—all twenty-one of them. Arrested that same week as well was the whole Nickel clan. Their count was thirty-four. Their crime? In the depths of the famine, they had traded their farm tools for food.

With them, the German Janzen vanished. Here was his crime:

he shared a blanket and a cup of tea with several vagrants once, back in the cold and hungry years, but they died just the same. The charge was, he was told, that he had poisoned them. Investigations proved the vagrants had been Bolsheviks of Jewish origin, and now he, too, was classified a dangerous provocateur. They shot him like a dog.

Here is the partial story of the German farmer Penner.

He tried to burn some documents. He was, however, caught, and people think that he was shot—to this day, there are relatives in Winnipeg who think that that's what happened.

No details left, alas, Mimi will tell you now. Nobody knows for sure. The story is that someone came and poked around the ashes and found a half-charred envelope that still said: "Mennotown."

That's how that story goes. To this day, not a trace.

Could it have been a neighbor's jealousy? A half-forgotten quarrel?

The minions from the gutter did not bother to explain. Their job was to contrive sufficient charges heaped on charges. The hate laws helped, now locked in place. It was a rabbit hunt.

# Chapter 80

Behind it all stood Dominik. The less he knew, the better. It was easier, it was better, not to know. He told Natasha many pointed stories to illustrate the principle that it was safer, it was better, not to know. That's why history calls Dominik a monster to this day. The silhouettes needed toadies; they stayed at the periphery; he did the work for them. His voice grew smooth and hot as sealing wax as he explained the why's and how's of wholesale ethnic cleansing.

"Tear down the old fences. Let the goats roam about," he told his mother who, by that time, in shock from boundless terror and deaf and dumb herself, could only keen and rock.

So let her wail! He was a man. He had his own priorities. He did not order bloodshed. His orders were all for arrest.

Ice-cold terror—that's what it took.

Naked force—that's what it took.

Arrest orders cluttered Uncle Benny's desk, where Dominik presided. Brass knuckles, rifles, revolvers—reliable weapons. Terror and torture—trustworthy means. It took a man, insisted Comrade Stalin, to pull out by the roots all opposition to the New

World Order the Party had outlined. He was that man. He was in charge. Nobody argued back.

He was pleased that they called him *tovarich*. He admired himself in the Apanlee mirror that hung on the opposite wall. Despite the crack that an anarchist's sword had left on the upper right corner, he saw a sufficient reflection, and what he saw pleased him no end—a magnificent cap with a five-pointed star, no newspaper shreds in his boots, his collar upturned and in his trouser pocket the finest of tobacco from Odessa. A street in Moscow bore his name. The Party heaped honors on him.

He pulled on his mustache and spit through a gap in his teeth. He grew by what he fed on: denunciations by the ream. For rudeness. Slowness. Illness. Breakages. Agitation. Exploitation. Counterrevolution.

He did not fool himself. No longer was he dealing counterblows.

He had already taken his revenge; all that was past; all petty peeves had fallen by the wayside; vindictiveness no longer mattered; nor was he merely forcing unfair quota laws upon recalcitrants. Now he dealt with a logic all its own and crystal clear to everyone: His own head: on the chopping block. Unless he kept on feeding culprits to the Antichrist, he would be shot—for running Apanlee into the ground and ruining the grain.

Night after night, the agents of the Cheka moved through the night like bats—faceless and terrifying shadows. They asked the ancient German patriarch whose name was Jakob Harms: "Hey, you! How long have you been practicing subversion against the New World Order?"

The old man did not even recognize the word. By then, he was just sitting on the porch and waiting for the Lord to come and call him home. That was his one last wish. Where he was going soon, he told the agents of the Cheka with his toothless gums, life would be warm and colorful. That's what his Scriptures said, long since consumed by flames. He tried explaining that.

They would have none of it. The agents cuffed him on the shoulders. "Give us a date. Give us a name."

His mind was weak. Names had long paled. Dates had no more meaning whatsoever.

"The local censor knows —" he muttered, and moved his caved-in mouth. "There's nothing left to say—"

"Then come with us. Don't bother taking clothing—"

He rose obediently. No one ever heard from this poor man, age ninety-three, another solitary word.

The German farmer Ediger stood outside Uncle Benny's study and waited to be questioned. He was the last male of his clan. The previous week, some government officials had arrived and dragged his father from his bed, an invalid, impoverished to the bones—but in his youth he had owned wealth. For miles around, he had been one rich kulak!

How rich? Too rich.

So rich he could afford to pay for a compartment in a train when he took leisure trips to Poltava. This self-same train now took him to the dungeons first, and later to Siberia. With him went his two sons, five nephews and a grandchild, not even thirteen years of age. One was still left: the farmer Ediger, who moved aside obligingly wherever Dominik appeared who was in finest fettle.

No longer did he have to bother finding them and prying harvest secrets out of them. They came to see him now, all begging favors, pleading mercy, shivering with fear. All of them. Eager. Willing.

He sat in Uncle Benny's rocking chair and rocked, while down the steps and all around the house, a queue of paupers formed. One little word could send the chill of terror down their spines. That word was: "Next."

Those whom he sent away, were gone. They vanished.

Families vanished. Villages vanished.

In numbers untold and nowhere recorded, the Germans all vanished. They vanished.

"Next. You! Somebody came to me to document that you sold grain without permission and kept the profit wickedly—"

"But I—"

"Sign this confession. Save me a little trouble."

Next.

"How many horses did you own? How many pigs? How many cows?"

No matter what they said, no matter how they tried to put a thin veneer on improprieties against the New World Order as outlined by the Party in weekly bulletins, Dominik just rolled his tongue and smacked his lips and told them, one by one:

"You exploited the downtrodden masses—"

Arrests of kulak families became the order of the day. It was the only order of the day, and Dominik was firmly in the saddle. He was the one to carry out the orders from above, for he had practiced with the anarchists; he still remembered cleverly what he had learned from them.

He raided them repeatedly. Sometimes he used the mob. The mob would open and shut drawers, throwing socks and shirts and trousers on the floor, while the detested parasites—the traitors! agitators all! hatemongers all! exploiters all!—now stood in clusters in a corner, their faces ashen with their fear, eyes lit like Christmas candles.

He told them many times: "Not one of you is innocent!" They all had hoarded grain. They all had kept forbidden livestock. And scores of them had feasted on the burlap sacks America had sent. Now they were at his mercy.

He filled his cart haphazardly with things that struck his fancy—kettles, axes, mirrors, quilts, tin ware and copper ware, along with basins, razors, scissors. He rammed another rifle butt through yet another window. He overturned a flower pot. He kicked a cat. He spit into their supper.

Before he left, he nailed a warrant on the door: "Don't touch. State property. Tomorrow, I'll be back."

Thus Dominik became the Cheka's instrument—a formidable force. A horn gave one sharp blast, and down jumped Dominik: "Here! Sign this protocol. Don't give us any gall."

No wonder, therefore, that some Germans, in the end, agreed to push the manure cart for Dominik. He made little speeches for them: "Do you remember now how you engaged in criminal activities? Don't be your own worst enemy. You're assigned to the cucumber brigades—"

Next!

He terrorized, and they complied. The formula was simple. Before he understood that formula, he had not dreamed that it could be so easy.

He sat, his legs outstretched, at Uncle Benny's desk, which overflowed with papers. To his left sat an appointed medical inspector, to the right a clerk who helped him sort out names. Six chairs were set against the wall. Two revolvers lay next to his pen.

"You will now tell me once again about the time when you made common cause with spies and infiltrators—" Next.

"You will now document why you decided wickedly to entertain four foreign royalists—" Next.

Let them be sly about their past; he, Dominik, could not be easily deceived. He hooked his thumb through his belt, adorned with the five-pointed star. "Next! You are next! The evidence against you is documented in this folder—"

The floor around him was littered with sunflower shells. There was a ringing in his ears. His wide, stolen belt buckle glittered. His head swam with his might. He was so strong, he was so feared that Shura did not have to queue up for an extra onion batch.

Outside, the sun shone merrily. His quota problems paled.

By fall that year, Dominik no longer bothered with the questions; his task was stripped down neatly to seven simple words.

"You're guilty of a hate crime. Next."

He had the knife. They owned the underbelly.

Some tried to argue back, though not for long. The twins decided to fight back, despite their mother's tears.

Those two said to Natasha's bastard in one voice: "Now, listen, Dominik. You listen hard. What proof is there that we have ever harmed this country?"

"Proof? What is proof? I've never heard the word."

They said: "We won't confess to crimes of which we are not guilty. We will not sign that we committed treason."

"What was Larissa doing, Citizens, three years ago, while harvesting the cabbage patch, grown in defiance of the law?"

They looked at him and knew: "He slaughters blameless life—"

He looked at them and knew: "Escape is on their minds—"

He fingered them repeatedly, but he was careful not to push; between them stood Natasha. Instead, he spoke derisively: "To steal that bucket full of grain was criminal. Don't argue that you aren't guilty—"

Some tried, though not for long. "We were still in the midst of the famine. We were coping with chaos as best as we could."

"You acted alone? Who else was involved?"

"I give you my word: I acted alone."

"Three minutes left. Think of three names—no, better make that six!—and they better be good names. They better be excellent leads—"

"I acted alone, but now I remember. You are right; I was thieving. I confess; a handful of grain from the government bin—"

"—two minutes—"

"Not even a cupful. A handful. My children were maddened with hunger—"

"Don't play your silly games with me. Who else was there? Who else filled his pockets with government grain? One minutes still remaining—"

"May God forgive me, I remember: My neighbor down the street, three houses to the left—"

This happened to the German farmer Redekopp of Alexanderwohl, old as Methuselah.

By then, he had lived ninety years, and not a day without the Holy Spirit's guidance. His sons, their sons, and their sons' sons had spread across a hundred thousand acres of the richest soil of the Ukraine. His father and his father's father had been the area's model farmers, and his great-grandfather had pushed his wheelbarrow, on foot, filled to the brim with German piety, out of the swamps of Prussia and all the way to the Ukraine, right next to Willy Epp, first preacher of the Brethren. He had lived long and well, this ancient German, Redekopp, before the Revolution came and labeled him a traitor. He had assumed, a foolish man, that he would be entitled to a peaceful death in his own bed, advanced in years and heaped with honors, his children by his side and chorusing.

Now Dominik held him by his lapels. Now Dominik yelled in his face so that the spittle flew: "Just so the rules are clear. Last night was just a dress rehearsal—"

"But I—"

"That fourteen-year-old grandson you have left? The apple of your eye? He is in custody already. We found him yesterday—"

This fourteen-year old, so they say, bit through his tongue before he, too, confessed, admitting wholesale treason. He whispered, staring at the bloody spots where hours ago his fingernails had been: "I now accuse myself and others—" and was found lying in a crimson pool before the day was gone.

"Too bad. Too bad," said Dominik. "Next. Who is next? All traitors guilty of a hate crime must be found. Somebody has to find them. It might as well be me."

He sorted lists and yet more lists. The formula was simple. A kulak was an enemy. The Germans led the way. No people had more kulaks than the Germans.

As long as he accused—repeatedly, relentlessly—he was safe from being accused. Terror was his vehicle. He drove it at full

throttle.

And proof of wholesale treachery, he found, was easy to come by. Amazing what he found, once he looked hard enough.

Thus, for example, was the German farmer Giesbrecht taken into custody for sabotage.

"Here is a paper for your arrest. Admit you fed grain to your chickens!"

Deaf in one ear from several previous beatings, this farmer, straining hard to hear, stared at an animated Dominik through crusted, swollen lids. "Have mercy. Never once—"

"Shut up! You lout!" yelled Dominik. He took the German rudely by the arm. "We know you are a spy. You're harming Mother Russia. We know that for a fact. The government has proof of harmful insubordination—"

"But why—" the German mumbled with confusion.

"What? You ask why? Did I hear right? The fool is asking why! Let me refresh your memory. Unless you tell us what you know, I have no choice but to believe the worst. Who else was guilty of hatemongering?"

"But I—"

"How many sons do you have left? Unless you tell us all, they have two choices left. It's heaven, or Siberia."

Mild-mannered and bespectacled, the farmer took a knife and drove it through his conscience: "God help me, I remember. I overheard my neighbor Neufeld praise America in several private conversations."

"Who else was there?"

"Now it comes back to me. Write down the names of Rempel, Peters, Wiebe—"

"Ah! That is useful information. The only pity is: it comes too late. We took them in already."

"But didn't you just—"

"So? In the name of our glorious Soviet Union, we must arrest you for suspected sabotage."

An awkward word could do it. A vague suspicion. A neighbor's grudge. An old, unsettled score.

Sentenced to death: for preaching.

For stealing a chicken.

For having missed two days of work.

For having praised a foreigner.

For pilfering collective property.

For spilling stolen wheat into a trouser leg. Don't make us laugh: to claim that you were starving is slandering the Party.

A man collapsed; none helped him up. Another vanished without trace; nobody dared ask what happened. Whenever Dominik appeared, they trembled, and they shook. He was but one peg in a devilish game—no better, no worse than the rest.

"Soup kitchens? Ha! It was unpatriotic to take food from corrupt governments—"

When in a benevolent mood, he would give them a stern dressing-down. He would tell them, a glitter in his eyes: "I'll send the overseer to check on you tomorrow. Go home and think up three more names—"

At other times, he did not feel so lenient. A cinch to probe for weaknesses. Child's play to find a fault.

"There was a fire at your barn. What should I call that fire? Negligence? Or sabotage? In either case: ten years."

The German farmer Letkemann was found to have suspicious relatives in Hillsboro, and he was shot for that. He was not even given time to finish his last supper. Shot that same night were his three sons, two grandsons, and an accidental visitor. A blanket sentence, fit for beasts—and no one said a word.

In better days, Marleen's own martyred husband had had a childhood friend named Johann. They came for him as well. They came for him at midnight and pulled him out of bed. He was still limp with sleep.

They kicked him hard and broke a rib. Blood gurgled through his teeth.

They yelled at him: "Don't nit-pick now. Confront your

wickedness. Here is the dotted line. What? You refuse to sign? Confess that you maliciously betrayed the merits of the Revolution—"

He begged: "What have I done? Where did I fail?"

They yelled: "We ask the questions, Citizen!"

Before he died, he learned he had admired Western decadence by bragging of his relatives in Kansas. He agreed he had grievously injured the Party.

They shouted, kicking him: "Give honest testimony now. Help us expose the traitors. Who else felt as you did? Who else has relatives in Kansas? Here is a pencil and a sheet of paper. Write down a full description of your crime. We know the general facts. You fill in the details."

Now and then, a shadow fell, but Dominik shooed it away. Still, it returned, no matter how he shushed it—for it was Uncle Benny, he and his many books.

The fattest book that Uncle Benny ordered from St. Petersburg did not last through a week, for the small hunchback read with joy whatever came in print.

He, Dominik, read not from joy but, poorly, from a sense of duty. His reading was laborious but thorough. He put a cross here, a check-mark there.

Next. You are next.

He cleared the dryness from his throat. You, next.

Another shadow. Dorothy. She wore neat curls across her ears. She even powdered them.

He roused himself to action. "A little favor for yourself, eh? Here. Write a declaration."

To his friends, he gave fat jobs. His enemies went begging.

He slapped down a folder and roared: "You missed three days of work. You claim that you were ill?"

"I slipped and fell—"

"That's what you claim. I claim that it was sabotage. Where is the proof? Look what I have right here. See? A confession, already made out in your name—""

Next.

The German farmer Fehr had failed to get a license to increase his carrot patch. Five years.

The German farmer Krahn had asked for information about leaving Russia. Eight years.

The German farmer Hildebrandt had hidden several Cossacks in a foiled attempt to help escape the deposed tsars. The firing squad for him.

There was no end to it.

Thus did the Antichrist catch up with the enslaved, trapped Germans. Now they all huddled in the hallway, waiting to be seen.

They walked into the room where Dominik sat proud and scrutinized the treason in their freckled faces while chewing the end of a pencil. Along the wall stood three interrogators—their faces bland, their small eyes roving, scattering showers of sunflower seeds.

"Next," muttered Dominik, who still drank—more than ever.

No detail was safe from his eyes. Nothing was off-limits now. He scrutinized his victims' faces, then their pockets, then their past; he checked until he found what he was looking for; he checked on absolutely everything.

He did what others did. He did so on secret command. Hundreds of thousands did likewise, helping to purge the country.

"Look, you can try to prove to me whatever strikes your fancy. But I, in turn, will prove to you that two plus two is five. Who else was there? What else was said? What did you overhear? Exactly?"

"I didn't—"

"Well, let me help you, then. Did your old father not come back, last week, this after having spent three years in prison? I heard there is a chance he might be re-arrested. Does that improve your memory?"

Sweet days for Dominik. He dipped his pen into the ornamental ink well sunk deep into a chiseled ridge and told the Ger-

man farmer Loepp, whom he had known for close to thirty years: "Will you agree to spy on your neighbor as part of your citizen's duty? No? You will not? Don't claim you didn't have a chance. Don't say I didn't treat you fairly—"

Next.

"Were you a member of a counterrevolutionary plot?"

How many sons? How many uncles? Cousins? Nephews?

Here's a pencil. Write them down. And don't leave out your grandfather.

"I can't remember—"

"Your memory is short? Well, let me help you, then—my memory is intact. Two of your daughter's last remaining sons? Both stood in line to take their handouts from Americans. Starred names in this fat folder—"

# Chapter 81

No one in Dewey's church had ever asked, nor ever would have thought of asking: "Why dost Thou tell us not to kill, and then kill every one of us?"

Faith walked on feathered soles in Kansas. So, too, in Germany.

The Führer's succinct mandate: Faith. The people's chorus: *Ja!*

The Führer's flag was not a symbol anyone took lightly in the thirties. Faith, Faith and yet more Faith—but now with a decided difference: Not in a dubious afterlife as compensation for a blood-stained world, but in yourself, your Fatherland, your ethnic past, your children's sunny future in a reborn, cleansed Germany, devoid of illness, poverty, despair, corruption, ugliness.

"Soon, ruin will no longer stare you in the face," the Führer said. "Soon, terror will be gone. Soon, our streets are going to be safe again, as in the olden days."

The masses hushed with reverence. The swastika looked like a double cross; it soon replaced the Cross. The Führer did not

strain, as Dewey did, for words. The Führer's rallies, ringing with his passion for a world where health and strength were wholesome and sloth and sickliness were foul, where had a right to honest profit wrestled from the soil and profiteering was a crime, soon brought the people out-of-doors. Vast crowds began to gather as soon as meetings were announced. The papers praised the Führer. The people trusted his intentions. He said he would clean up with mop and bucket.

He said: "The gloves will finally come off!"

The masses cheered. They liked his clear simplicity. By just looking at him, they could tell: Here was a man who called a spade a spade. Here was true leadership that called the bankers on the carpet. Here was a man who called a hoax a hoax.

"Give me a match," the Führer said, "and I will light a fire between the devil's hooves."

The Führer liked a radish better than a rose, and Heidi started growing radishes and carrots and took out every rosebush by the roots. Along her whitewashed fence, she planted three rows of tomatoes, and side by side with the tomatoes, she grew her salad greens, her carrots, cucumbers and beans.

The earth was soft and willing; and day by day, the doors flew open, sunshine flooded in, and youngfolk sprawled about her kitchen and asked each other in loud whispers:

"What smells so heavenly?"

Her youngfolk came from everywhere, mostly out of the gutter, and she was busy mending—not just their trousers but their hearts. When Heidi came upon the nameless orphan who saved himself out of the horror-stricken years, her youth hostel was going full blast. She ran it as a halfway house, and it was always full.

There, Heidi shone with happiness, self-discipline and energy. She was as peaceful as a little girl who tended to a flock of geese, yet all the same, she was enthusiastic, systematic, and determined. Wherever she found little boys and girls in need of nurturing and warmth, she gave them sugar cubes.

"Nobility of service," said Heidi every day, "is something you must learn. The Führer leads. We follow. You put your shoulder to the wheel and shove. Is there an argument?"

Although her husband was a Prussian landholder with an unbroken pedigree and vast lands in Silesia, he went to work for her: he hired carpenters and masons and added extra rooms where several of her favored charges stayed on their off-duty days.

Among them, Jonathan was special. He knew that he was special. He slept on her couch in the kitchen.

He was sure he had died; this was heaven.

She was there, that first morning when he awoke to a new life as though from a bad dream. He stood in the doorway and took it all in—the spotless floor, the sparkling window panes, the fragrance of potato pancakes, her blond hair in a coil.

Still barefoot in her frilled pajamas, her belly bulging gently much like a leavened loaf of bread that rose with air and warmth, she spotted him and waved. "Come in. Come in. Here, try my jam. Straight from my cherry tree."

He found a chair and sat on it, his body limp with sleep. She was bustling about in the kitchen, about her the patter of six little feet. She kept passing out coffee and pancakes, cut into delicate strips.

"I called on various friends to find out who could spare an extra pair of shoes," she told him, while spooning gruel into the youngest of her brood. "Show me your feet. What size?"

The morning light was glaring. The only sound in her bright, scented kitchen was the small sound of clicking spoons. He didn't take his eyes from her, quite at a loss for words. She had a lively step, a friendly, unpretentious smile. She moved about her kitchen nimbly. She lifted his sunk chin.

"Come. Look at me. Last night, after you fell asleep, I turned the collar of a shirt a neighbor left with me. I have an extra pair of pants I found in a forgotten drawer. A good friend found some underwear for you, still in acceptable condition. Soon you'll be good as new."

He frowned and shrugged his shoulders. All that was far from certain.

"But first things first," said Heidi energetically. "Right after breakfast, you and I will march ourselves to the delousing station. I do not care what's crawling on your head, but other people might. Is that all right with you?"

She took him to a huge, red building and waited patiently outside until he came back out, shorn like a sheep and smelling of carbolic.

"How neat you look," she said, and buttoned up his coat. "You look magnificent. I'm proud of you. There's work to do. These days, nobody is untidy."

His throat became taut with emotion.

Today, the forces that dictate the way world history is written have much to say of him, this man whom Heidi called her Führer and Jonathan would, too—and none of it is true. Ask Mimi—she will tell you. Had he been just a fourth-rate underling with a mad yen for holocausts, he wouldn't have lasted a week. The ripening grain was his story.

In those young years, it wasn't shrill. It wasn't coarse. An atavistic presence started growing quietly in the soil of Germany, and those who felt it growing then will tell you to this day that it was something clean. And deep. And true. And powerfully moving.

"Say what you will," they say. "The Führer had a vision. He gave us back our soul."

There was pride in one's folk, in one's roots. The weeds no longer choked the sidewalks. The store shelves filled once more with merchandise. The country was recovering; the clover stood in bloom. The woods of Germany became a picnic ground, and tranquil was the sunshine, and hallowed were the stars.

Hath not the potter power over clay? The air was thick with incense. The children's hair was glistening with dew. The Führer's planes were silver dots against the sky, and humming like mosquitoes.

Somewhere somebody claimed maliciously, gesticulating, that the beloved German Führer was as sexless as an angel, as fierce and bloodless as a dragon, as mystic as the Russian monk.

It's just not so. Not true.

He had rays flashing from his hands, and therein his power was hidden.

The German people's spirit had been numb for years, but now they had an alchemist with a magnetic nature and a discriminating eye.

This, Heidi understood. She knew as well as anybody else that he, the Führer and his men, had sworn death to the Antichrist—but, in addition, she was practical. She translated such lofty words for the small, outcast boy whom she had found and taken in much like a wounded animal.

Where she believed his heart was—that's where she dropped her anchor. "Now that I think if it," she said, "I think you need a bicycle."

She was as good as her word. She fattened a goose and then sold it, and bought a bicycle for him. She would kindle herself on his bliss.

He skinned both knees ferociously. She watched him kick the tires.

When he was sure she wasn't looking, he tried to reach a speed that pulled the wheels right off, but Heidi saw, and Heidi said: "That's scandalous behavior!" and for a long and wretched weekend gave him her coldest shoulder.

She was like that. She had free hand to punish any way she pleased, but Heidi hardly ever punished; she barely raised her voice. She emphasized character training. The day came all too soon when she pulled him aside: "What have you hidden in your trousers?"

His face resembled scarlet cloth. "It's nothing, really. Nothing."

He still stole. Everything. It was a weird compulsion. He couldn't stop himself. A headlight. A door handle. A piece of

string. A box of rusty nails.

These things, he knew from past experience, had bartering potential. You hoarded what you found. You hid it in a hole you dug, or else beneath your bed.

"A paperweight? You take that back," said Heidi, looking stern.

"But I—"

"Right now. And you apologize. You say that it was a mistake; you do not need a paperweight; I do not want to hear another word from you until you have apologized."

She spelled the Führer's values out for him in weeks and months to come.

Honesty—better than thieving.

Cleanliness—better than dirt.

Valor—better than cowardice.

Purity—better than filth.

One day she said to him with a small twinkle in her eyes: "You're growing, aren't you? Tell me the truth. Somewhere must be a girl who's standing on her toes?"

"How do you know such things?" he asked in fear and awe.

He loved her more than he had ever loved another human being, or ever would again. He longed to touch her hair. He did not do that. Ever.

It took a long, long time to break him of destructive habits, but Heidi was a patient teacher. She coached; she watched; and she explained. She reminded him, time and again: "You are the Führer's hope. You are his future tool. Inside and out, you must be pure and clean."

She laughed at him and poked him with her index finger and linked her arm with his. Her husband was an officer; she grew a splendid family with the same concentrated dedication with which she grew her radishes—three sitting at her breakfast table, a fourth born after Jonathan moved in, three more to come, if you believed her husband's teasings—enough for the Motherhood Medal. Her babies made her chubby; her hair started showing

some gray, but she remained for Jonathan far into middle age as young and beautiful as when she first appeared and took his icy hands into her own to warm them with her love.

When Heidi's sons were old enough, they were given their very own daggers. On each was written: Blood and Honor.

Before these youngsters even went to school, their heels already came together in a sharp, snapping sound as though released by rubber bands. Their arms flew forward in salute.

"Now life is beginning in earnest," said Heidi. Self-discipline forbade her to shed tears, but she trembled with pride and exhaustion. "Without a sense of duty to his land and to his fellow citizens, a man is not a man." Those were her exact words.

She was fastidious about detail. She expected the best at all times and took it as a personal catastrophe when those she loved gave less than what she valued and deserved—precisely all those qualities of body, heart and mind the foundling out of Russia still yearned to make his own. She was goodness and virtue and magic. She set her table in the open air. She was a goddess who baked apfelstrudel.

She said that it was up to him to build a better world; that she would show him how. "It's us against the Antichrist," she said to him one morning.

She did not need to spell it out. He knew.

"You have until Friday to make up your mind. And never mind excuses."

He was only too glad to obey; nature itself obeyed Heidi. The sun shone when she picnicked with her charges by the lake; the wind howled when she set the fireplace ablaze. She got up in the middle of the night to help the cat to a new set of kittens. The postman, the cobbler, did special things for her. Her mailbox overflowed. Her shoes grew brand new heels. She had good words for everyone. She cared for a bedridden neighbor. She never missed her duties at the Winter Help. She was a bridge that brought people closer together—her sum and substance, always, her lacerated Fatherland in need of willing hands. She

knew precisely how to put together once again the broken fragments of a young boy's previous life not fit for any dog.

When Jonathan came into Heidi's care, she was already supervising, scolding, praising and improving assorted homeless boys who, scum and filth just yesterday, now wore their caps set sideways on their brows at an audacious angle and studied themselves in the mirror with pride.

Blue eyes. Blond hair. Square chin.

She glowed to see them proud. She fed them applesauce.

She campaigned long and hard to give them the color of health through hard work and strong food and good deeds. Why, by their heels she dragged them out of bed and scattered them into the fields!

"You have a purpose now! From now on, everybody up at five!"

The day was never long enough. If there was work to do, she led the way; she squared her chin and disappeared around the corner to make this world a better world, and never mind the snickers. She kept collecting piles of blankets, boxes and umbrellas—going steadily from house to house. "What can you spare? Will you help out? We are crafting a better tomorrow."

And why not? She had proof. She looked at Jonathan and knew that he was all the proof she needed. When she first found him in the dirty streets of Germany, as gray and cold as the gray, frozen snow of Russia, she knew that there was chaos to be organized.

She changed him, head to toe.

It took a while for Jonathan to realize that he could put away his fears. No longer did he need to grub for food in garbage cans, for Heidi saved for him that extra wedge of sausage.

"Eat! Eat!" she always said. "Thin as a stork! You must eat more. Will you shame me by eating so little?" She spread his bread with butter on both sides. "There is plenty of food in the garden," said Heidi.

She was like that—doing things for the people she loved as though she did things for herself. Her kitchen could not hold her guests; she always had more guests than beds; the world loved and appreciated Heidi.

She told the baker: "Four loaves of bread, please—" and the good baker gave her five.

The bachelor greengrocer saved up the biggest cantaloupes for her. When one-pot Sundays came by order of the Führer, she didn't call that stew.

No elbows on her table!

Around her, it was "please" and "thank you" all the time for every little matter. Now it was frequent baths, respect for your elders, self-discipline and punctuality, contempt for idleness and sloth.

In return, it was armsful of wood for her stove. It was an honor, always, to sit right next to her. Long after she had left the house to patronize a favorite charity despite a raspy throat, her spirit lingered on.

And she was not alone. It was renewal time. The country shone with purpose, and soon there was a Sunday rooster in everybody's pot.

School children clustered everywhere—with tiny swastikas on their lapels and not a button out of place, hair straight as if drawn by a ruler. With young and healthy lungs, these youngsters sang old, patriotic hymns that promised a rejuvenated Germany reverberant with pride.

When silence fell, the Führer spoke. His message never varied. That message came from loudspeakers, strung up from tree to tree. The banners unfurled. Fists clenched and then unclenched. Many bells started ringing with mirth.

A worthy tomorrow.

No bloodshed.

No mayhem.

No sloth.

The flags kept on rippling and snapping. The German people

trembled with emotion. Out came the folding chairs when there was a parade. The Lord, the faithful knew, had matched the Führer with his task.

Soon, brides and grooms descended through the arches to take the Mystic Cross salute. Their cheeks aglow, they pledged each other loyalty, their hearts awash with gratitude: The future would be orderly, with many healthy children. Each child would have an education—as fine an education as his young mind allowed; the Führer paid the way.

The couples clutched moist hands and sealed their love with misty eyes—and knew that if they worked and saved, if they were diligent and thrifty, and did not waver in their certitude that there were moral absolutes —one day they would be rich, in spirit and in goods.

# Chapter 82

"You need an education," said Heidi to the foundling, as soon as he was thawed, and took him by the hand. "The Führer pays for it."

"Don't wear yourself out worrying," he told her awkwardly. "I'll do the best I can." It seemed to him as if a greasy cloud had lifted to suddenly reveal the sky, scrubbed clean with soap and brush. Now fortune smiled on him.

"Good. It is settled, then."

Heidi was an exacting tutor in Jonathan's maturing years. "Nothing but 'A's," she instructed him firmly as she walked him to school to register him suitably. "Don't think the future comes for free. Don't bother with excuses."

He studied hard to make her proud; he never missed a day. Soon, he fit in; before long, he excelled. The teachers went about their lessons calmly, instructing or reproving. Soon, Jonathan was first in fitness training. He learned to spell acceptably. The training stressed not only scholarship but conduct overall. The Führer liked things alphabetical and orderly; meals came by the clock, beds were made on schedule, hay was fluffed up

twice a day for the cattle that grazed in the meadows, flicking their tails at flies.

He reveled in the regimens. He had no doubt about the stark necessity for rules. He gained an education in the basics: intensive, silent reading; writing from dictation; careful penmanship that was not allowed to slant.

Nobody slanted. Nobody slouched. Nobody ever dared speak out of turn. The rules were black and white, and Heidi lavished praise when praise was genuinely earned, stern reprimands as needed.

"True character," said Heidi to the growing boy, "can only come through discipline. You must try hard. Don't look at me like that. I know you try. You must try harder still."

Here were the strengths she stressed as though they were a litany: a warm heart and engaging manners, limbs bronzed by wind and sun, a well-honed, fearless mind.

Speak loudly.

Think clearly.

Be fearless.

Be tough, yet sound in morals and ideals. Stand at attention when someone of superior rank and order passes by.

He soaked it up, awash in affirmation. Young Germany, in Heidi's view, would grow to be the focal point of culture. Were a time capsule to be dug up a hundred years from now about the early years in the Third Reich, it would affirm of Jonathan and his emancipated, rescued generation: they learned pride in their clan and their roots.

The Führer's hand swept soothingly across convulsing earth and gathered, magnet-like, the human filings that manufactured terror and despair had scattered everywhere. He spoke of a beautiful morning, of a future now cloudless and clean. Before the year was out, that message was condensed into a single word, and it was: *Lebensraum.*

The Führer asked repeatedly: "What of your children's future?" and people pushed and shoved and shouted at each other

to get a better look. He spoke of the harsh necessity of soil for coming generations while, all the while, a gentle rain was splashing on the roofs. The sun came out. The frozen chunks of snow had melted; young parents gathered on lawns, laughing and jostling one another. Proud papas carried toddlers on their shoulders so they could see the patriotic pageantry, while older children flew their kites on daisy-strewn, sweet-smelling meadows.

When Jonathan brought home another merit badge for hiking twenty miles through rugged mountainside, not pausing even once, it seemed that Heidi might forget herself and bend to him and kiss him. He thought she would. He held his breath and stood on tiptoes, practically, but she leaned back just in the nick of time, patted his hand, and smiled at him in gentle understanding.

Regardless, he was family. He gladly linked his fortunes to the only family he knew. He did not tell a soul she picked him from the gutter. He just stayed on and on. He opted freely for the Hitler Youth. His mission was as clear and pure as fresh dew on a daisy. His heart was mad with joy, and Heidi's pride was palpable.

She said to him while buttoning his coat and handing him a sandwich: "Tuck that in your stomach. Then go from house to house, and don't take no for an excuse, for in the struggle against tyranny, the gloves have to come off."

He pocketed her flyers. He knew that he would live and die and never once feel doubt about the aptness of her text. Working hours were regular, fathers employed, children polite, with round chins and cornflower eyes. The farmers, too, were overjoyed, and not without good cause: fat kernels filled their barns. The moneylenders, banned! And just as Dewey used to do at a Rotarian lunch—and no one thought that wrong!—the Führer brought his people's hands together in a repeated incantation: "Let us be strong. True. Noble. Honest. Sacrificing. Let us be servants for a greater good."

It was a message no one argued, then or now, because the

people understood.

As Jonathan grew into larger trousers, Heidi stayed his idol. He simply worshipped her. Her face become the standard by which he measured everything. Her glasses did not fit; they were too big and kept on slipping down her nose, but in his eyes, she was a flawless miracle.

Through half-closed lids, he kept on watching her. She looked distressed when he slid back into the tawdry stratagems that had afforded him survival in the streets. When he frustrated her, she played her part to silence. When he did well, she washed the filth of anarchy away and handed back his pride.

Above all else, she mothered him, and nothing was too small, too insignificant for her attention. She saved her magazines for him, with slogans underlined. While he curled up inside her finest feather quilts as outside, raindrops spattered, she sat and knit his socks. She put an extra charcoal pan next to his bed the day he had a cold. Her soft, sweet voice could break most any fever. He loved her utterly.

"You aren't only you," said Heidi, puttering about. "You are a tool of history. You are an instrument to craft a better world."

She knighted him. Those were her very words, secluded in the deepest furrows of his being to strike strong roots and make his soul break out in leaf to breathe in the fresh air. No word that Heidi ever said to Jonathan was lost.

Her mission? She told him, again and again, while his heart incandesced as though currents of lava coursed through it: "It's you against the Antichrist. Light versus Dark. Young Germany against the Ancient Foe."

To think that only yesterday the world was gray on gray!

It was as though her gentle hand had pushed open a door to a sun-flooded meadow. The darkness tore apart, the landscape was flooded with sunshine and warmth, the future stood before him as though in high relief. The streams began to soften. The year grew light and warm. The sun awoke the violets. Snowdrops appeared. The swallows chirped in full accord. Somewhere in

the distance, a lone musician played an ancient ballad from a heroic past on a harmonica.

It felt right, in his mind and his heart.

The Führer distributed medals to reinforce the sense of duty, and that felt good and right. The Führer's train pulled through the German villages, stopped here and there to load up boys and girls, all volunteering happily to harvest riches, all singing to the whistling of the train that crisscrossed Germany.

He jumped aboard, his heart ablaze. He helped the farmers plant their turnips, a commonplace enough endeavor that took on magic qualities as all around him, nature smiled—and how it smiled on youth, in those awakening, bewitching years when hope and trust ran high! He had never seen nature before; now he watched it in absolute awe.

Sunflowers turned wide, smiling faces to the light. Squash creepers started budding. Shy, sheepish daisies peaked and laughed at Germany from deep within the meadow grass. And from the mountains wafted scents of earth and rock, while swarms of bees buzzed back and forth, their stingers hidden in their wings. The apple trees were blooming. The clover scent was pure. Someone was cutting grass. The hay lay in long rows. He tossed the baby Lilo into it. She rolled in it and squealed.

"She's yours to cherish," Heidi told him, smilingly, while handing him her latest offspring, a squirming bundle that smelled of formula and soap. "Pick any name you like."

He stood on one leg first, then shifted to the other. He knew not what to say. He tied a Führer flaglet to her ankle. He tagged her with the best he had to give to her.

This baby learned to walk before she was eight months of age, scornful of any danger. He washed his hands before he picked her up; he gave her bouncing piggyback rides on his back. He took good care of her. He grew gentle and patient and shy. She gave him wet and sloppy kisses; a more generous youngster was hard to imagine.

Soon, she was chalking swastikas onto the pulsing bark of trees while he stood by and watched.

The day he bound himself to folkish brotherhood, with pledges that the handbook specified, Heidi was there, the toddler in her lap, to reap her applause for her work. She watched with misty eyes how her beloved Führer put his sharp signature with light across Jonathan's heart.

Her alchemy had worked. Of all the *jungvolk* forged to steel, he was the handsomest, no longer skinny, gaunt and gray, thanks to the many pans of fried potatoes Heidi kept warming for him on the stove. Her voice was low and sweet. She spoke with trembling pride. "How strong and clean you look."

He knew she knew his demons. They had an understanding: she never laughed at him when he outdid himself with zeal, caught by the fire of his mission; she helped him break his unproductive habits; by her acceptance and respect she knighted him and raised him from the gutter on a shield.

Sometimes she teased him gently. He did not tease her back. He longed to touch her hair, to tell her that he loved her. He never did. Not once.

The Party soon became his bride. He earnestly belonged. He stood within his folk. The Party carried men to power on its shields. Whole armies moved to do its bidding, and that was good enough. All the while, huge bonfires kept on flaming to the sky, the sparks of which fell into Heidi's eyes. She blinked each one away. She was there to encourage and beam. She was magic and order and safety.

"You must think of your Fatherland before you consider yourself. That is my best advice," said Heidi, and awe washed over him that had more depth than love.

The decade came of age, and so did Jonathan. One day was never like the next; there was too much to do. She still spoke the same litany: "This is about moral perfection."

She packed meat in his hamper, poured tea in his bottle. She was as inviting as fresh-fallen snow, so spic-and-span she even

scrubbed the sidewalk. She was as fragrant as that cup of coffee she always brewed for him and for herself, for that half-hour every Wednesday morning when she put every task aside so she could talk with him.

She talked to him at length, a kind and patient teacher. Her message was simplicity itself: for those who were willing to live by her rules, there was the basket lunch.

He listened, shivering, until his head was spinning. These things were of enormous weight and of immense importance. She gave him a lump in his throat. She was touching the timbre within.

By and by, he told her things as well—things he had never told another human being. He told her of the night that finished Apanlee for him.

Heidi listened in silence, her eyes growing wider and wider.

He crouched like a cur while he stammered, his head atop her knees. He told her, gagging on his horror, how long it took to beat frail Dorothy to death.

"I counted," he stammered, while hanging in the teeth of a ferocious Beast. "I counted those blows, one by one. Each blow is still embedded in the marrow of my bones."

"That is the Antichrist for you. That is precisely why you have to learn to give up all your selfish wishes," said Heidi.

She unknotted his fears much as she unknotted his laces. A tear or two fell on his uniform, however, and suddenly, he knelt, his arms around her warmth, and told her in a strangled voice: "The black, fat soil of Apanlee is mine."

"Yes, *Lebensraum*," said Heidi, sighing softly.

He lifted his head from her knees. She let him drown himself within the blue of her warm eyes that slowly filled with tears.

The Mystic Cross leaped ceaselessly from heart to heart to heart. No wonder that, as soon as he grew old enough, he took the Führer's garb. He stood within the fold.

He burned with pride and purpose, as he pledged solemnly to love the light and hate the dark.

"Tonight, you must sit at the head of the table," said Heidi, and he saw tears of ownership shoot into Heidi's eyes. The night was filled with song, proclaiming joyously that, given Faith, determination, valor and obedience, a soldier was invincible. The world would fall to his power. Corruption would fall to its knees. Here was the evidence: in the streets, he had blunted his hunger with water, but from the moment Heidi took him in protective custody, he had enough to eat, a mended coat with padded lining, an ironed shirt with not a button missing, a place where he could sleep without a single thought of fingers fumbling, scabrously, beneath the covers to find the warmth of youth.

He did all his assignments willingly, with an abundant heart. His life was made to order. He marched to order willingly; the flag flew at the fore; the horses pawed the cobblestones and shone from the oats of a generous winter.

It was regeneration time. The factory chimneys once again spewed out white clouds of steam. In store and shop, the shelves were bending with goods. There was no place for weaklings in the streets. The future walked on air and whistled, and so did Jonathan.

*Die Fahne hoch! Die Reihen fest geschlossen*
*SA marchiert mit ruhig festem Schritt*
*Kam'raden, die Rotfront und Reaktion erschossen*
*Marschiern im Geist in unsren Reihen mit.*

His shirt was blue now, like the sky, cut generously in the shoulders, allowing further growth. He wore a bright red armband, replete with oak leaf cross. He clicked his heels; his fingers aligned with the seams of his trousers; his boots shone with the force of brush. He stood at attention, repeating: "The best is barely good enough for Germany."

For Jonathan, all this was atavistic, panoramic, embedded deep in history, and cosmic in its sweep. It was bewildering to think that there existed still a world of unbelievers.

He had not known that he had energy enough to fill his every vein to bursting. The martyrs of his kin spoke in a voice to Jonathan. They spoke to him in hushed, excited clusters. And

what they said to him was this: "You aren't you. You are the vehemence of nature reacting against venom. The Guardian Angel hovers over you because your cause is just."

It was like a reel; he ran it over and over. Whole towns erupted in pageants of fire and ribbons and colors and songs, all meant to give praise to the Führer. Even a broomstick, as shown in a cartoon passed on from hand to hand with all-around smiles, now stood at attention, saluting.

Here was a man whom Jonathan could emulate, a man of great personal courage, a leader to the workers' liking who ended bloody strikes and frenzied, fratricidal fights in every street of Germany.

The solstice fires flared. The sky glowed with the lights of hope and victory. Uncertainty and aimlessness were gone.

To Jonathan, the Führer was more god than man. The trench coat was his garb. His picture was in every window for children to admire—a hero in numerous battles, taking hill after hill under fire. Several horses had been shot from under him, but he had survived; he had triumphed; he triumphed because he was right. He pushed the banker's treachery, the Treaty of Versailles, into the gutter of the past and even stomped on it.

The country stood united as a wall, arms linked against the foe who had defiled the pride of Germany. Banished were fear, disorder, sloth, shame and disgrace. Gone was the stench of brothels! Day by day and week by week, the Führer grafted moral energy onto a populace whose empty bellies, only yesterday, had cramped with shame and hunger. He promised to clothe the nation with glory. He still rode freely, unafraid, in open motorcars, cheered by the multitudes.

He mingled with the people, for he was one of them. They saw he was a genuine ascetic; he never touched a drop of alcohol. He held his country's bleeding heart within the warmth of his cupped hands: "I will sweep away all corruption. I will heal the wounds of the treacherous war and yet make the Fatherland great."

He translated their unspoken wishes. Their collars were no longer limp. Their shirts were clean and starched.

He shouted: "The harvests are telling our story!" and everything the farmers grew turned velvet and then gold.

He wrote in his angular script: "A healthy body, a strong will are the foundation of the future—" while the entire youth of Germany sat cross-legged in the farmers' straw, with smiles in their eyes, on their lips.

Soon, Jonathan was gone for months on end, but he still spent free time in Heidi's scented kitchen, where he was always welcome. He took the toddler, Lilo, in his lap and bounced her on his knees.

*"Hoppe, hoppe Reiter*
*Wenn er fällt, dann schreit er,*
*Fällt er in den Graben*
*Dann fressen ihn die Raben—"*

He loved the little girl; he lavished his feelings on her. She was a strong and sturdy child, all white teeth, dancing eyes, already matching smile with smile, a charmer and a flirt.

She grew by leaps and bounds.

The earth was chockful of potatoes. The breezes were balmy; spring was in the air; the rivers were flowing once more; the ice had melted and floated away; the mares were heavy with foal. At the butcher's, huge quarters of beef were unloaded, and hefty chunks of meat enriched the people's cabbage soup.

"Now we feel proud once more," the grateful people said, and planted flower gardens in the shape of the beloved Cross.

These were the circumstances, then, that made a man of Jonathan. He had been born again. And he was not alone. For millions just like Jonathan, those were bewitching years. Wherever the Führer appeared, the streets went wild with joy. His drums were rolling thunder. His songs were deep and rich. He had their trust; he was their choice; they applauded until their palms stung.

Never had anyone known a more potent and powerful voice. Never did so many people cry as though they had one voice:

"You lead! You lead! We shall obey. For lo, we have waited for you!"

He spoke earnestly, softly; the power of his innate leadership was there; the door was cast open; the faithful sighed ecstatically and started walking through.

He spoke of the beauty of labor, the dignity of toil. He brought songs to the lips of his people.

Their voices swelled, a giant wave of supplication, a chorus in the millions:

*"Es schaun aufs Hakenkreuz*
*voll Hoffnung schon Millionen,*
*Der Tag für Freiheit*
*und für Brot bricht an."*

Hope, trust and Faith—above all, Faith!—now sprouted as abundantly as did the rye in fields now free of weeds, and lush. Gone were the bankers and tormentors! Gone were the rancid oats!

How blind and wrong it is to say today, as Archibald still does, right on the television screen, that it was hate, not love, that powered Jonathan.

# Chapter 83

It was a protracted struggle, but in the end, the story goes, this is how Dominik won out—by terror, base and raw. He cracked the German spine.

Marleen resisted the longest, but after a very hard winter, she knew that she was poorer than she had ever been. Her feet were wrapped in rags, her mouth caved in, her forehead deeply lined, her loved ones in the center of a web of accusations.

"I now agree," said Marleen, lips compressed, "to be in charge of the government ducks."

This was good news for Dominik. What more could he have wished? He knew that he had won. The choice for every German left was now stripped down to this: kolkhoz or deportation—or, alternately, firing squad.

Their way of life—no more.

Their churches—rubble. Pigsties.

Their schools and institutions—just heaps of crumbled stones.

When, in the end, the twins agreed as well to supervise the bean procurement brigades, he knew he did not need to prod them. Unlike the Russian field hands, the Germans were reli-

able; they did their duties well. They were silent, but did what was needed.

Larissa did the laundry for the expanding nursery. The diapers turned from gray to white. The formula the babies drank was balanced and on time. Young Mimi—with time left over from her classes at which she ever more excelled—helped Dominik to keep the books in order and, in return, sat beaming at his table, not willing to catch spies as yet but willing, at the very least, to do her part to be a go-between.

And that, for Dominik, was good enough indeed.

He saw no reason to complain and treated them respectfully enough. Not that he trusted them. He kept both eyes on them—their nights had eyes; their walls had ears; they plotted, and they schemed. It pleased him in his soul to see them jump when a dry branch snapped underfoot.

The crucial thing was this, however: a balance had been struck.

He saw to it that terror came to them down the chimney and sat with them at table—where they, has he surmised, sat muttering time-tested prayers, useless prayers. But there was food now on their table and, now and then, a special treat.

The results could be seen in his quotas. His Germans ran more efficient work brigades than any of his neighbors.

"Some of the credit," he therefore told the twins, "in truth belongs to you."

He had come to visit. He lingered.

Their eyes spoke to each other, but they had nothing to say in reply.

"I'll even give you extra sick leave slips so you can have your Sundays back," he offered. Refusal to work on a Sunday was still a grave offense in Soviet Russia, but who would need to know? If he decided to be generous, who was to tell him no?

"You hold the key to Apanlee," he told the twins, dispensing geniality. "All progress rests with you."

To which they still said nothing.

In silence, day by day, they supervised the crew of shivering Ukrainian workers that faceless men had shipped to Apanlee in cargo after cargo to strengthen the kolkhoz. The twins were there to greet them. The twins were firm and punctual. They set a fine example. They taught the field hands to shoulder their hoes. They taught them to rub down their tools with dabs of sunflower oil to keep the rust away.

He knew they were plotting to flee. He knew as well that such defiance against the Soviet leadership could break his neck, since workers, no less than barley and potato sacks, were valuable state property.

He therefore buttonholed a foreman whom he trusted: "Say, have you heard the latest rumor?"

"I have. I have. Who hasn't?" The foreman deftly picked a louse from his frayed sleeve and squashed it between thumb and finger.

"And do you think it's true?"

"I do."

"Well, then?"

The foreman set his feet apart and stared at Dominik with blood-shot eyes. "Well. Who am I? Why are you asking me? I just heard this and that—"

"What did you hear?"

"I heard they are rounding up horses—"

"Who knows about the rumors?"

"Around here? Everyone."

A chill crept up Dominik's spine. "If that should happen in my district, I'd be done for; I'd be cooked."

"That's what the roosters crow."

"Go through the seams of their coats. Pry off the heels of their shoes. Be sure to check them thoroughly."

"Of course. I'll also check under their armpits—"

"Do that."

The foreman popped several sunflower seeds in his mouth. "Let's punish them often—" he added, and Dominik finished: "—to keep them in line."

He let Natasha know. She smiled when he mentioned escape. She had her answer pat. "They will never abandon their homestead. They can't carry their land in their pockets."

Here's what she saw with gratitude: the twins had yielded to his siege and were now state-commissioned overseers—a step above the crowd. It was, as far as she could see, a winning situation all around.

"If you catch any rumors, be sure to let me know."

Natasha snorted with disdain. She knew what powered Dominik. The snoopers slapped him on both shoulders. The Party heaped him with honors.

Thanks to the twins, with farming reigns firmly in their hands again and Dominik restrained enough at least not to risk toppling the delicate balance, he could, thanks to their German diligence, fulfill near-perfect quotas once again for several leading commissars who came periodically to check the quota lists—if only he could solve a little riddle.

If only he could analyze the trouble with the ducks.

The state ducks were recalcitrant, refusing to lay eggs. Now that poultry was his chief production output, it was imperative to show a proper count of eggs.

Marleen tried several remedies. "But still, no eggs," she said to Dominik.

She and Larissa would often talk in whispers. It was as if they sent each other telegrams.

"September here. And still no eggs," the German women claimed. Not knowing what their secret was would have made anybody wild.

The silence swelled and swelled until it started suffocating Dominik. His glance slid off Larissa and fastened on Marleen. He stared at her, and she stared back. He knew she understood.

"Don't make me mad," he said softly, drumming his knuckles. "You better not try anything foolish."

"We don't know what you mean."

"Strong lights cast dark shadows," he told her.

"Citizen, when it starts snowing," she told him in return, "it snows on huts and palaces alike—" She spoke softly into the fading twilight. Her voice was frail yet calm.

"I'm safe," said Dominik with forced bravado. "My quotas? Unlike anybody else's. No better workers than the Germans. Don't you agree that's true?"

"You curled your mustache several times to look just like your father. Somebody might remember you are half German, too—" She took from his desk three sunflower seeds and popped them with great nonchalance. It was a gesture so unlike Marleen, who always kept her distance and would not even pass him in the hall unless there was no choice, that he burst into laughter. It sounded rather shrill.

She heard that, and she stored it. It seemed to give her strength.

Marleen stepped silently aside as several duck procurement functionaries came to Apanlee and took away, yet once again, the barley harvest Dominik had managed to produce.

"Without hard barley in its crop, how can a duck lay eggs?" she said to Dominik.

"We have to raise our barley quotas," he shouted with hysteria in his voice. "Do I need you to tell me that?"

Marleen became an oracle. "A duck epidemic—that's what will happen next."

"What? Citizen! What are you saying? Out with it."

"It's happened before. It could happen again. I feel it by the brittleness of beaks. *Tovarich*! We must help the state. We must block the upcoming duck epidemic—"

"And soon!"

"Who would risk losing all the gains the glorious Revolution wrought?"

"Right. Absolutely!"

"Let's you and I get to the bottom of why your ducks are blustery—"

"My ducks? Your ducks!"

"They used to be my ducks," Marleen informed him quietly,

"before the Revolution set me free. Let's be precise about this matter. Let's be politically correct. They're Comrade Stalin's ducks."

"That's what I meant so say."

"And what will he decide, should his fine ducks begin to die? Not that it's up to me to give you good advice."

"Don't anger me."

"Why would I want to do that? You're doing splendidly in every single quarter. The Party loves your name. The papers sing your praise. The only thing that worries me is this: your bins are short of barley. As a result, your ducks are a bit blustery. I counted five, just yesterday, that looked quite blustery to me. This morning, they were dead."

"You're sure? You couldn't be mistaken, Citizen?"

"I counted, Citizen. I'm sure."

"Here's a pen and paper. Write a report. Be sure to make it detailed. Be sure to sign it properly—"

She did. She blotted the red ink. She handed him the paper; he could not meet her eyes. He felt a rash form on his neck; it started itching badly. He started pulling on his earlobe. The itch became unbearable.

"You're absolutely sure the ducks are in for trouble?"

"Five dead. I counted on the abacus."

"You went to find the abacus to count five ducks, Marleen? Are you provoking me? Is that it? You're testing me? That is a waste of time—"

She let that pass. She sat there, saying nothing.

"There are stiff penalties for being wasteful of your time, don't you know that?"

"I do."

He studied her in silence. Her hair pulled from her face and tied into a firm and savage knot, wrapped in a shawl against the draft, she looked as any Russian would have looked; she looked more Russian than German. But even in the dusk that settled on them both, he could still see the special cast, the strong patrician cast of features.

"Well, Citizen?"

She watched him chewing off a hangnail. At last she spoke. Her voice was ice. "You are in trouble. In big trouble. You know that, Dominik. Can you explain to the authorities why suddenly the ducks are blustery?"

"That's up to you. You must explain. I'm watching and waiting, Marleen—"

He kept on rubbing thumb and forefinger together while she gave her report yet one more time. "I took the abacus to count the eggs by sorting out the crates. Four hundred and twenty. Precisely. Way below quota. You will have to report the strange quota shortfall—"

"You document your deficit," he ordered. "That is your job. You are in charge. It's in the documents that I put you in charge."

"Your name goes on the quota list. Not mine."

He started to abuse her. "You are the brigadier. Fill in your last name. Your first name. The names of your sons. The names of your daughters. Don't leave out any blanks. Blanks will arouse suspicion—"

"But you," said she, indulging in a bold and spiteful tongue, "are my superior now. You're doing splendidly. You've set the floor and proved there is efficiency at Apanlee. You've proved yourself. You've cleaned up Apanlee. If there's a sudden drop, you will be held accountable. I'll fill in your last name. Your first name. Your mother's name. Your father's name. Your father's mother's maiden name. I won't forget the *umlaut*—"

"I don't believe your count," said Dominik, now drumming even harder with his knuckles. "You have until tomorrow. Count every single crate."

"I never make mistakes."

"Why don't you make yourself agreeable and useful? Come back tomorrow morning and give me a good answer as to why suddenly the ducks—"

She replied with a nonchalant shrug. "In olden days," she told him with glittering eyes, "some people would have claimed the Devil was behind the dreaded duck demise. Now, luckily,

we have discarded all that superstitious nonsense of the past. Now culprits must be found."

"I said, you listen! Listen!"

"No. Now you listen, Dominik. Now culprits are in high demand. If there's a quota drop in any government kolkhoz, the state will try the culprit for high treason. Of course that could never happen to you. You have protectors in high places. Right, Dominik? It's whom you know that counts?"

He barely moved his lips. "Here's what you need to know. The bacon cuts both ways. The sooner you figure out what could be wrong with the ducks, the better off you'll be—"

"I have not the faintest idea."

He swore softly while cornering her. "You tell me. This minute. What could induce those ducks to lay their eggs so we can fill the crates?"

She hardly ever laughed but now she laughed; she hadn't laughed in years; it startled him; it frightened him; she was seized by such a fit of mirth it shook her, head to toe. "Why are you asking me?" she laughed.

"You will regret—"

"*Tovarich*, put down those sharp scissors," she told him, and laughed even more. "Now look what you did. There's blood on your hands, *tovarich*. Whose blood is it that's on your hands, *tovarich*?"

He licked his thumb: "Well, now. Let's see. You are the mother of two useless parasites—"

"My sons," said Marleen, recovering, "are honorable citizens. You have installed them in the Party's graces, haven't you? You signed your name to vouch for them? Thanks to your help, they have restored their names. My sons are helping Comrade Stalin to rebuild this glorious land. Their output is the envy of the neighboring kolkhoz. No one produces finer quotas. No one is more esteemed. My sons are doing nothing whatsoever that is against the law. But if your quotas drop again, no telling what might happen."

"What do you want?"

"Five travel papers," said Marleen.

"I can't do that. I would be shot!"

"I know," Marleen said, laughing still. "Your mother always hoped that you would rise from humble origins and turn into a bureaucrat—"

"If I were you," said Dominik, "I'd hold my tongue. I'd really hold my tongue."

She calmed at that. "That's excellent advice."

All night, he walked his room, remembering her eyes.

# Chapter 84

The ducks continued to be blustery. No matter what Marleen did, the ducks withheld their eggs. The day came, all too soon, when Dominik was forced to call her in to remedy the quota deficit by any means he had at his disposal.

He sat her down. "Say, you and I have known each other for a long, long time. We're practically friends, and therefore you'll remember—"

She found resources deep within. "Yes, I remember. I remember. When you were small, I used to check your pockets—"

"My pockets? Ha! Now I'm checking yours. What would I find if I looked hard enough?"

Her gaze was on the faces of her ancestors, still hanging on the wall, covered with spider webs. She waited and said nothing.

He rose, went to the window, stared wordlessly out at the misty afternoon, came back, sat down, dusted his desk, blew dry the red ink on the names of her sons, crossed his thick legs this way and that, and finally confessed:

"I need your help. It pains me to admit that. If you help me, I might help you. I have friends at the highest levels—"

"That kind of power," she said softly, "could turn most anybody's head."

A slight color rose to his cheeks. He continued reshuffling his files. He cleared his throat. He hit the folder with his fist.

"Why dwell on the past? We are older now. Wiser. We need each other. Right? We're living in challenging times. What might convince those ducks of yours to lay more eggs for me? Let's see eye to eye. I need those eggs. You need to sleep at night and not lie staring at the ceiling—"

"I don't know what you mean."

With strength bred in by centuries, Marleen sat out her siege. She had her Faith—that's how. She and her savagely truncated family had journeyed through the lean, mean years—five of them left, still holding hands!—and somehow they would journey out of this.

He seized her by the arm.

"I will agree to strike the *umlaut* from your maiden name. I'll burn the document that says that you begged food from Kansas. In return, as a personal favor to me, you will have a nice chat with your ducks—"

"You're bribing me? You know that bribes are criminal."

He backed away and kept his voice in check. "I'm not bribing you to tell me how to do it. I'm just curious about the remedies you used on sluggish ducks before the Revolution set you free—"

"The past is now gone, and good riddance! Along with the pharaohs, caesars, and tsars."

He did not say: "Leave now."

He lit a flint. He managed to produce a perfect smoke ring, floating it overhead. "I worry a little," he admitted at last. "However, I don't worry much. There are some die-hard pessimists who fear the old times will be back. I'm not one of them."

The room turned dark. She sat there in silence and waited. The lamp was almost out of oil; he lit it, and his fingers shook.

The flames licked at the edges.

He started pacing then. She did not move. She watched.

"I have given your scandalous duck egg deficit," he said in the end, "a great deal of additional thought."

"And what is your conclusion?"

"Think carefully before you answer. Eight-year-olds vote these days on who shall live and who shall die. Your daughter is now sixteen."

The minutes ticked away.

He filled his lungs with smoke. "How might your daughter vote if someone came to her and said: 'Here is your choice. You have two brothers. One must die. Which one?' Would that induce those ducks to lay their eggs?"

This was a time, both knew, when preachers moved like shadows. She sat in the glare of his lamp. She managed to say this: "You are speaking in absolute riddles."

"Citizen," said Dominik, "where are your sons tonight?"

"They left for a production meeting to improve Apanlee. Your quotas have a question mark pertaining to the ducks—"

"A better guess might be that they are preaching slyly on the parable? Behind the chicken coop?"

"How would I know? And how would you?"

"It is easy to break under torture. You know that some confess to what they are told to admit—"

She took that, too, in bitter silence.

"This week, how many eggs, Marleen?"

"Three hundred and eighty."

"That's all?"

"That's all the eggs I found."

He bore down hard: "Last night, I had the silliest dream. I saw the curtains move. I dreamed the twins were plotting. They were rounding up horses for flight. I dreamed that both were caught, but only one was spared. Don't ask which one. How would I know? Not even their Baba could tell them apart."

She tried to keep her voice from quaking. "I cannot tell you anything that I myself don't know—"

He leaned back leisurely in Uncle Benny's chair. "Your story doesn't change?"

"No, Dominik."

"I know what I know," he said slowly. "And what I don't know, I can guess. Last night, someone came to me and told me—"

She showed no curiosity. Her silence had the weight of stone.

He coaxed while leaning forward. "The door is closed. Nobody else will know. Tell me the truth. Escape is on your mind?"

"You have my word," Marleen said evenly, "that I have no escape in mind. However, I speak only for myself. Where would I flee on my old feet? I am too old and worn, and almost useless now for our glorious Soviet future except for little tricks I learned before the Revolution set me free—"

"On proletarian honor?"

"On proletarian honor," said the German woman whose great-grandfather, once upon a distant time, owned eighty-thousand acres and seven hundred serfs.

She told him the very next evening: "You will be pleased, *tovarich*, with my initiative. I reported two dozen dead ducks to the Soviet duck grievance committee."

"You what?"

"I did so in quadruplicate. I told them: 'Two dozen perfectly good ducks. They just keeled over and lay dead.'"

His eyelid started twitching. "Two dozen? In one night?"

"More since last night."

"How many?"

"Forty-seven. One by one. Like dominoes. I ran just as fast as I could to bring you an accurate count. I already reported the loss to the duck epidemic committee."

"The duck epidemic committee?"

"They listened in silence and scribbled your name."

He raised his lids, and there was naked murder in his eyes.

"While I was there," Marleen reported evenly, "I wasted none of my government's time. I reported to them that some of your

geese, too, appeared to be ill. I requested they send an inspector to check on the goose count as well—"

"My geese? They aren't my geese!" he all but shrieked at her. "They are state property geese!"

"I asked for a goose epidemic inspector to do a methodical check on state property geese to forestall a state property goose epidemic—"

He sank back in his chair. When he could speak, he begged: "Let's not play cat-and-mouse games, Citizen. Let us put all our cards out on the table."

"All right. Let's keep them there. Until we're through."

"Marleen! You listen now, and listen hard. Why did I violate seniority and go against my better judgment and give you a good job? Look, I'm learning. I'm learning. All this is new to me. No one knows fowl like you. Didn't I stick out my neck, last week, swearing on the coffins of the Revolution's fallen heroes that no one here, at Apanlee, was plotting to escape? Didn't I sign that thick sheaf of papers confirming that I trust the twins as I would trust my brothers?"

Marleen bit off each word: "Dominik, you sign a lot of papers. When you were small, you should have learned to read."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"My daughter saw you sign the document that said you suspected the Apanlee duck epidemic could turn into a goose epidemic—"

"I did that? *Bozhe moi!*"

"It's gone. The mail coach took it yesterday."

He stood. He stretched to show his nonchalance. The silence grew and grew. She watched the silence worm the words from him. "It is unpatriotic to discuss a travel paper."

"It is unpatriotic to let an epidemic spread."

He went to the window to peer into the inky dark. He came back, sat down, dusted his desk, crossed his legs this way and that, and finally said this:

"Your file has been misplaced. As soon as it turns up, you'll be in serious trouble. In very serious trouble. But in the mean-

time, just relax. You have until next week—"

"I have a friend," he said to her when yet another week had passed and geese were falling ill like flies, "who has some trouble in his stables. My friend asked me to help him out. His specialty is goats."

"Goats?"

"Goats."

"You don't say! Goats? What will be next? Could it be horses next?"

He reddened slightly. "Goats. That's it. Just goats—"

"Go on. You're lucky, Dominik. There are no goats at Apanlee. At Apanlee, it's horses—"

"Don't interrupt me now. I have this friend. There is a strange, disturbing malady that's plaguing many of his goats. He's panicky. Can you blame him? This man has influence in highest quarters. He promised he would use his influence. To start the paper trail, my friend agreed to give you this—"

She took the sheaf of paper. She studied it at length. She held it up against the window. "It's worthless, Citizen. This is no travel paper."

"It states you are a citizen in reputable standing. It states that you complied with all the rules of the kolkhoz. It says I trust you fully. That's as far as I can go. Here is my seal and signature. All here. In purple ink. I am carefully blotting my name."

"I cannot help you, Dominik."

"Don't make me angry, Citizen."

"Soviet goats," Marleen reflected, leaning back and smiling broadly while studying the ceiling, "are very different from the tsarist goats I used to know back then. Soviet goats are far superior. Twice as fat. Twice as strong. Soviet goats do not get sick. When I remember all the worthless remedies we tried on our no-good bourgeois goats before the Revolution set us free—"

"Think hard now, Citizen. It's vitally important. What were those remedies?"

"There was a formula that had to be just so. We used to mix

it with the seed. It's gone. I looked for it and looked for it, but I must tell you, Citizen, it's gone."

"You don't know where it is?"

"No. I have no idea."

"You don't know how to find it?"

"I do not even have a clue."

"You can't help out my friend? You can't help settle down his goats and forestall a disastrous loss of goats?"

"No. See? Without that secret formula, that vitally important document, I can't. It must have perished in the embers of our glorious Revolution."

Dominik said softly, staring at Marleen: "Some people have to suffer greatly during change. It might as well be you."

She held herself erect. She had her slogans pat. "I can't imagine what you mean. There is no suffering in Soviet Russia. To speak of suffering means undermining wickedly the spirit of this country—"

He said after a long pause. "The village is buzzing with hearsay. I heard that Larissa has made a decision. They say she is rebraiding every hour on the hour—"

She did not take the bait. She made an airy gesture. "That one? You know how women are. Hare-brained and unreliable. She can't make up her mind. Today it's Yuri. Next week, Sasha. She'll end up an old maid."

He shifted in his chair. "What about Erika?"

"Straight 'A's in every subject."

"Good. Fine. A clever girl, that one. She'll want to study at a university. As the offspring of a kulak, she'll run into some serious trouble. Somebody has to smooth her way."

She looked at him. She said: "This week will be a scorcher, Dominik. Your horses' droppings, thick with flies. Flies carry equine epidemics—"

He cleared his throat. He cleared it twice. "You don't mean that."

"Hoof-and-mouth," she told him with glittering eyes. "Once that scourge gets a good foothold in hot weather, there's just no

stopping it."

He spit in a high arc: "You will now tell me everything about your relatives in Kansas."

"Why not? There's nothing much to tell. A long, long time ago, I had this meddling cousin. What was her name again? Oh, Josie. Josephine. I knew her casually when she was still a youngster. A long, long time ago. We used to play together—but let me tell you, Citizen, I never liked her much."

"You used to write to her. I have the evidence. You wrote her several carping letters, maligning our glorious Soviet State—"

"No. On the contrary. I sent her invitations. She would have liked it here. Our glorious Soviet Russia treats the sexes equally. Oh, by the way. I touched your horse's nose this morning, Citizen, and it felt feverish to me."

"I'll give you a hen for your dinner—"

"You can't do that. Your hens are all state property. I stroked your horse's nostrils, at the communal trough. The horse's nostrils, hot!"

Small drops formed on his upper lips. He shouted, helpless to contain his rage: "I'm warning you! Don't push me now!"

"*Ach!* Only yesterday, in a neighboring kolkhoz," reported Marleen, triumph now filling every furrow in her old and wrinkled face, "a fine mare started foaming at the mouth. Ha! It keeled over. It fell dead. It's hot and muggy weather, Dominik. I know at least two dozen stricken farms, and all in your vicinity. You must immediately take care of this emergency! Tomorrow, several government inspectors will arrive and say: 'Somebody has to suffer during change. It might as well be Dominik.'"

He dropped all pretenses. He grabbed her by the arm: "What do you want? Just tell me what you want."

"Five sets of travel papers," said Marleen. "For it is clearly written in the Bible: "Wilt Thou now let my people go?"

"Patriots wouldn't dream of discussing such treason."

"Patriots don't have hoof-and-mouth diseases in their stables."

"I can't. It's my own neck—"

"Four, then. Please let my children go. I'll stay behind. I'll

help you, Dominik. My word is good as gold. You know I keep my promises. I've dealt with hoof-and-mouth before—"

For an eternity, their glances locked. He drew a long, shuddering breath and sat down. "It isn't true, is it, Marleen? Tell me it isn't true. I heard that two entire villages are lining up for flight. Would anybody be so foolish?"

"Four sets of travel papers," said Marleen. "and not one question asked."

"I'll get you two," he promised slowly. "And I'll withhold the rest. That way, I'll make sure you do exactly as I say. Two. That's my bottom line. Now tell me, point by point. What is the secret to controlling hoof-and-mouth?"

A tremble ran the length of Marleen's spine. "Two? Valid papers? Swear by your mother's hidden icons."

"Yes. By my mother's hidden icons—"

It's folklore what she told him next. Here's what she said to safeguard coming generations, to save the racial spark, as she had saved the grain: "Just keep the hay dry, Dominik. Just keep it dry and crisp."

# Chapter 85

Though many years have passed, the story is remembered and repeated to this day in Reedley, California—of how the flight was planned.

Nobody trusted Dominik; nobody trusted travel papers; it was extremely dangerous, but in the end, they fled. It did not happen right away. It happened in the depth of winter. The rivers would be frozen four more months.

The village lay in darkness. The horses had been shoed and fed. The sleds stood oiled and waiting. The snow was falling without cease. A gale-like east wind had been blowing for a week.

No light showed in a single window anywhere.

The arrow of the Lord was trembling within Sasha's heart, heavier than the sands beneath the sea. "Look, I go forward—" he prayed, a man already marked, while struggling through huge drifts of snow, "—but Thou art not there. And backwards, but I can't perceive Thee—"

He knew his script. A fist started pounding his heart. All else was stripped away from him, and nothing more remained.

"—my true part has been chosen. So let me be worthy; let me be the lamb set aside for the slaughter to come. I fail to behold Thee. I cannot see Thee. But Thou knowest the path that I take—"

He prayed as the desperate pray, feeling cold and bruised and saddened and defeated, yet strangely elated, too, for a decision had been made. Together, he, Yuri and the girl had drawn the lot, and then they sat together for a while, and no one said a word.

Two sets of travel papers, stamped and signed, were now securely hidden in the shafts of Yuri's boots. Though doubtful that they were reliable, all knew that having documents of sorts was better than no documents at all.

"When Thou hast finished testing me, I shall come forth as gold—"

The wind whistled sharply. Fine granules started whipping from the sky. It was so cold no ax could split the earth. The icy air drove crystals through his skin.

"Thy will be done," he prayed, hypnotically, as though by saying it, repeatedly, he could coerce comfort. "Thy will be done. Thy will be done. Most people's lives, these days, have very little value. My life has none at all—"

He prayed as though deep in a dream. He spoke Larissa's name as though he had already yielded her to death. His sorrow kept on pouring from his heart as though it were transformed into huge sheets of flame. He told the night: "We loved her both, for she was beautiful from every angle."

He felt dazed and numb, a stranger to himself. Despite the cold, his palms were moist with perspiration.

"Why two of us? Will finally we know?"

He tried to lance his apprehension while sleet and snowflakes closed his eyes and small, sharp icicles formed in his hair. The night kept keening softly. Cap pulled down over his brow, collar turned up, he pushed himself through the orchards, guessing at the familiar goose path, hard and slippery with ice. He felt his way to the back of Apanlee's east wing and carefully knocked thrice, obeying the code he was given.

"Open up! I'm here—"

The side door opened cautiously to just a tiny slit.

"Come in. Quick. No one followed you?" Natasha peered with swollen eyes into his face.

"I don't think so. I listened carefully."

He stayed out of the light, letting the sheen of the flickering oil lamp fall upon him just long enough to show her that he was alone. "Where's Dominik?"

"I plied him with glasses of vodka," Natasha whispered fiercely, this between sobs that were as dry as sheaves of corn exposed to arid winds. "I laced his drinks with shots of castor oil. I turned my hidden icon to the wall and made him sick as death. He's doubled up with cramps."

"And Shura?"

"I lured her to the nursery and quickly turned the key."

"Where are the others?

"Waiting. Close to a hundred sleds. Nobody touched his supper." Natasha covered her face with her hands. She hunched and started weeping: "Why two of you? Why two of you? Not even your mother could tell you apart—"

"The Lord on high is mightier than the roar of all the tides," he told her, awkwardly. He stroked the tears out of her wrinkles: "Your kisses never needed prompting."

"I loved you like my own."

"Yes. There was never any doubt." He felt a mounting urgency. Still, he took time; he put his arms around the servant and hugged her to himself. "Don't be distraught. It is decided now. You always did the best you could. What more could you have done?"

"I did. I did. And where is my reward?"

He looked into the darkness and tensed. He thought he had seen a quick shadow move. He told her, trembling in his boots: "The sacrificial lamb is here. It's standing right before you."

"Your promises, my little one. Your thoughts. Your dreams. Your hopes. For this, they'll shoot you in the orchards."

"A crown of glory and a diadem of beauty for the remnant of

His people," he told her, and she said, not easily deceived: "To take the blame so that your brother and Larissa can escape?"

He spoke as loudly as he dared. "I'll take the blame. It is the only way. Somebody will be punished savagely. It might as well be me—"

The others stood, he knew, with ears against the walls. He told Larissa and his brother softly: "Let us be linked, the three of us, for now and evermore—"

The now betrothed couple echoed in one voice: "—for now and evermore—"

He twined his brother's hands in Larissa's trembling fingers while, to his shock, a lustful thought ran through his veins, a rat. He squashed it with his heel.

Outside, the snow kept falling. The wind encased the night.

"One day, spring will be here again," he promised them, his own voice breaking, as he kept blessing them. "The soil beneath is stirring—"

The words did not belong to him; a stranger spoke those words. Within his inner eye, he knelt already, waiting to be shot. The blizzards of tomorrow would wrap the land into an icy sheet of snow—a sea of white, the landmarks disappearing. His words came by themselves.

"The soil is rich and soft." His script was memorized but, even so, he struggled for composure. "—you, dearest brother Yuri, take now this girl to be your wedded wife—"

Natasha watched in tears. Marleen stood, tall and prayerful.

"Those that be planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God," he told them in a trembling voice while his own eyes were frosting over. "They shall be fat and flourishing—" That was a bald-faced lie, but it was all he had to give, and so he gave them that, a lie. The wind kept up its forceful blasts. The weight of winter cracked the trunks of the acacia trees. "—they shall bring forth fruit for their old age—"

Larissa's eyes did not leave Yuri's face. All stood amid a current of emotions, swaying, and Sasha, leaning forward sud-

denly so he could see Larissa better, saw love and duty and surrender shine from her gentle eyes.

"The three of us. The three of us," he stammered, overcome. He stared at the girl, at the nape of her neck where a curl had escaped, and manly yearning came in one gigantic, pounding wave. He longed to touch her as a lover touched his bride—just once and not again!—but she stood next to Yuri.

"Thy will be done. Thy will be done—" the others muttered silently, all trembling as did Sasha, who yearned with all the strength stored in his virgin body to loosen those two braids of gold and hold their riches in his hands.

"Just once," he thought. "Just once!" That hair! Gold spun by generations! He longed to draw it lovingly across his wrists to chain him to his pledge.

"Grant me an hour with your bride," he said to Yuri, strangled, for his voice was no longer his own. "I need to be alone with her. I need to free myself. It won't take long. I'm battling with a monstrous nightmare—"

The bridegroom twin stepped back. The preacher twin stepped forward and took Larissa's hand. The others moved aside.

Natasha's eyes dilated. "The night is short," she whispered, anguished. "And time is running out!"

But he was blind and deaf to any other need but his, and all perceived it, all! Each one of them! that was the script! And, in the end, Natasha stepped aside.

The story goes as follows. The sacrificial lamb forsook the covenant and snatched at life in one instinctive gesture. They should have fled while there was time. The night erupted like a boil. Rough voices started pouring from the dark and, suddenly, there were the cudgels and the rifle butts that hammered down the door. In the confusion that ensued, the prayer twin escaped. With him escaped the girl.

The henchmen grabbed the bridegroom twin, instead—grabbed him by hair and legs and dragged him down the corridor and down the steps and kicked him brutally into the van that

stood outside already, waiting.

He never said a word.

Triumphantly, they took him to the dungeons, and there they dropped him hard onto the stony floor. A lock rattled loudly. A heavy door fell shut.

When daylight came at last, he looked around. Around the outer wall ran boards of wood. Two tiny windows trimmed one corner, too high to reach with his hands. He saw a bit of sky.

Three toadies came a little later, hit him with a revolver butt, and asked him who he was.

"I am the sacrificial lamb," he told them evenly.

"How do we know? How do we know?"

Before they left, they kicked him in the groin. No word escaped his lips.

With him in the cell were twenty other captives. No one spoke above a whisper. A prisoner lurched forward painfully to use the pail while moaning softly, then hitching up his bloody pants. The stench pervaded everything.

"What did you do? Why are you here?" The inmates stared at him.

"I tried to help two German villages escape," the captive twin explained. He said no more that day. The vermin feasted on the damned.

Evening came, then night descended. He huddled in the darkness and waited for the day.

They came repeatedly and beat him savagely, their faces murderous. He fell. They pulled him up, demanding: "Name? What is your name, you traitor?"

"A sentenced man no longer has a name."

He drew his knees up to his chest, as closely as he could, as though to fit himself already to his grave. Small pearls formed on his face. "Did they escape?" he asked, to which there was no answer. He heard the guards, comparing evidence in agitated arguments.

Another day passed by. A second. And a third.

"Name? Name?" his tormentors yelled, angrily. "Unnecessary paperwork for us if we make a mistake—"

He asked again: "My brother and his girl escaped?"

"Don't ask unnecessary questions." They punched him in the face and said: "We found the map that shows the escape route. It's written in a code. If you tell all, your problems will be solved. You can go home on Saturday."They asked repeatedly: "Besides your carrion mother, can anyone tell you apart?"

At last he said: "A nursemaid."

"Name? What's her name?"

"A loyal servant in our bourgeois household before the Revolution set her free. She cuddled me. She sang to me. Her first name is Natasha. She rocked me on her knees when I was just a baby—"

"We'll look for her, then. Will she speak?"

"She was my parents' loyal servant. She knows how to obey."

His tormentors came back and shouted angrily: "We cannot rouse Natasha. She fainted when we came. She can't be forced to testify—"

"So you'll just have to take my word? Then take my word. I'm Sasha. Sasha Neufeld. Did Yuri and the girl escape?" He still sat on the floor, his head against the wall. "Believe me, Citizens! I am the guilty party. I plotted and I schemed against my government. I'm guilty of gross sabotage."

"Someone must have helped you. Who gave you travel papers? Who mapped the route for you?" They hit him hard with their revolver butts. They yelled: "But who were your collaborators, Citizen? They're gone. Who gave them names and maps?"

He took a trembling breath: "So they escaped? Oh! Praise the Lord!"

The guards let fly of a volley of curses. "Two villages. It was a huge, huge plot. Who was behind that plot?"

Here's what he said at last: "She flung herself across my father's life and caused unending heartache. But when he died and left us all behind, she stood behind his children like a rock." And then he said without a tremor in his voice: "I am the only

guilty party. Nobody helped us. No one."

The day that Yuri Neufeld died was icy, gray. and brittle—a grim and dreary Russian day that spread across the frozen wasteland while storms kept heaping snow. But all was not in vain, for such a silence fell on Apanlee that every heart stopped beating.

They say it took some effort to bring this young man to his knees: he stood and took three bullets, while deep within him raindrops started falling—real country rain, warm, scented, softening, strewing virgin apple blossoms across the debauched earth.

As our anguished century draws to a close, nobody speaks of Yuri. No monuments for him on Pennsylvania Avenue. No manhunts for his executioners.

He was a farmer's son, of German ancestry. His Aryan blood helped fertilize our earth.

One Yuri Neufeld lived and died, because he knew—as even did his executioners who managed to shoot badly—that there will come again one day a harvest bright and good.

# Chapter 86

Some of life's oddest side effects of brutal blows of fate come in parentheses. It happened a few years ago in Reedley, California.

By then, the twin who managed to outrun the terror of the Revolution was dead. The Reedley folks were robust in their verdict: they called him the Mad Rooshian.

His torment never left. No rain, no sun could make it fade. There's clemency, the Gospel claims in many velvet passages, for those who lapse in Faith but reclaim certainty by seeking out the Lord. That's not, alas, what Erika would find in her pursuit to weigh the sacrifice of the forgotten twin against the cruelty of the bemustached ally of America—that brute of history who swallowed blood and spit out bones and had himself a feast.

As Erika sat in the fading valley light and listened to the story of Sasha having saved himself at the expense of Yuri, the Reedley farmers said of Sasha: "A bitter and bellicose man. Nobody bought into his odd philosophy."

They told her that when he arrived, quite mad despite his youth, he had a girl with him who hardly spoke at all. She claimed

she was his wife, in law as well as name, but he did not acknowledge her; he called her names and worse and sometimes even cuffed her angrily. It was a trying marriage. He kept on shouting at the hapless woman; she could have shouted back.

She never did. She hung her head. She took it all. Only her freckles paled. She stuck by him when others would have walked.

"Faith? Quackery! For shame!" he would berate Larissa who ran to close the shutters.

She served him faithfully. She turned herself into a fine, obedient Christian wife who strove to give him joy. His steaming coffee mug was always there, his collars always starched.

Larissa's life was hell, the Reedley folks told Erika; she might have left; she would have left, had she not had the comfort of her church. The brethren helped her steadfastly. They stood by her and prayed with her and helped her all the way.

He, on the other hand, kept shouting angrily: "I don't believe a word!" and would not let himself be rescued and redeemed, though the deacons came out in full force.

Some of these deacons, still alive, spoke briskly and judgmentally into the whirring tape recorder. They verified for Erika, in many chagrined words, that the disturbed and rambling refugee from Apanlee was part of that disheveled, tattered group that fled through the barbarian wilds of Asia and settled in the fertile Valley where their descendants—pious all! and numerous as pebbles on a beach!—grow peaches, figs and raisins.

To this day, that's the Reedley story - it ended not with wheat but raisins. You see them dancing on your television screen today, those California raisins.

"Don't get us wrong," one deacon said one afternoon with a contorted sniff. "No doubt your uncle suffered. No doubt he had his reasons. But when he spoke of Judas plotting New World Order stuff, way back in Russia, that's where we drew the line. We counteracted biblically."

They live correctly. Morally. When they have business meetings, they never rush a prayer.

They don't grow grain, however—though growing grain, in light of their long history since the black steppe was wrested from the Turks, would have been in their nature. When Erika inquired what made them switch their crop, they just looked at their shoes, hid their conflicting thoughts, and did not have an answer.

They told her that this Rooshian twin lived out a mediocre life—unfocused, unimpressive—doing this and doing that, first harvesting alfalfa, then planting figs and plums, and ending up with raisins. So let the neighbors win! That was his attitude.

He gave Larissa children, as many children as he had to give to her and she could manage to bring forth. To this day, all of them reside near Fresno, California, and all grow California raisins.

She loved her children well enough. They did not warm his heart.

His conscience perforated like a sieve, he once attempted suicide, but it was not to be. This happened on the day his mind snapped and he howled his given name was Yuri.

At that, his wife dropped everything and fell into a singsong: "It's Sasha, dear. You have that wrong. Don't fuss. Don't cry. Not even your Baba can tell you apart." She was his shadow and a study in forbearance, though her knees kept on knocking together with fear. She sat with him throughout that night and listened to his anguish and daubed his forehead with a freshly laundered handkerchief when everybody else had long run out of patience.

She soon looked faded and resigned, but her periodic bake sales for the homeless gave her joy. "But nothing gives my husband joy," she told her neighbors sadly, "not even young potatoes."

What stood between her husband and salvation, no Elder ever figured out.

Not a few oldsters still vividly recall how Sasha huddled on his porch in Reedley, mysteriously deformed, alone with his spas-

modic thoughts before he passed away, his poor soul laden like a camel, trying in old age to soak up the fading sunshine as if to melt away the permafrost that settled deep within the marrow of his bones.

"He had a choice," they said to Erika. "He could have let himself be rescued and redeemed." In his young years, the Reedley legend goes, he was a man of God, one of the truly chosen.

He wore no badge of treachery that anyone could see, but it was whispered that, back in his youth, he broke a mystic covenant. He turned into a thief. He stole an hour from the Lord to kiss the girl belonging to his brother.

The Lord—much like an angry banker seizing defaulted property—in turn took all in one wide sweep: his pride, his sleep, the vigor of his manhood, his reputation as a man with whom the leading citizens of Reedley might have bandied flivver jokes or might have wanted to go fishing.

One day, at prayer breakfast, a fat Rotarian, leaning left politically, in contrast to most Reedley people steering middle, praised several heroes of the Revolution—for by that time, America had turned supportive of the social struggle unfolding on the Russian Continent.

That day, the Rooshian turned so violent, things almost came to blows.

Every harvest unleashed bitter forces. Every blessing unleashed that mad gleam. When the town folks in the Valley thanked the Savior for another bounteous harvest, he bit his tongue and silently endured. His neighbors cut a careful path around him. The murky matters of his past were never cleared to good men's satisfaction. The details of his flight out of the wastes of Soviet Russia remained in hazy fog.

This much is clear—he never made it to his kin in Mennotown; worse yet, he never gave a reason. He stayed where he crash-landed—this after having fled a nameless horror half-way around the world.

For he had seen the Antichrist, he claimed. "With my own eyes," he said.

And now he saw it, he would claim, within the leafy thickets—a thousand eyes and ears. "Your children won't be spared," he warned, while flabbergasted elders poked each other with sharp elbows. "You're next. Your turn will come. The toothy grin is here. It's sitting in your lodges."

They merely said: "An interesting perspective," and talked of something else. They found the whole thing puzzling. They said: "Don't talk like that. It's not acceptable. This is America."

He argued that they had broad streets but dusty, narrow thoughts. They kept rolling their eyes in dismay and stared into a sluggish horizon.

He howled: "I am speaking for you and your children. Planned terror will be next. Our kingdom was stolen from us."

They said again: "Not here. This is America." They shook his warnings off as though his words were bits of chaff that stuck to morning slippers. They would not let him finish what he had come to say. They thought he was grotesque. He begged them to support him in his heresy, but they already knew tomorrow would be no different than today. They tucked their children, one by one, more deeply into gospeling and stuffed themselves to bursting.

One day, in desperation, the Rooshian paid a visit to the *Fresno Bee.* There a reporter sat him down and tried to string his words together into a dark, tormenting tale.

It was a futile struggle. His words did not suffice; his throat constricted woefully; his eyes bulged; and no sound came forth at all. Within his scrambled memories, all was just blood and mush.

The deacons came and went. They said to him: "We have to talk to you, and it is very serious. Repent before God the Almighty."

He would not let himself be calmed. Once he was heard to say: "I was reported shot, and that's how I escaped—" Another

time he whimpered: "They snatched my dearest brother, and that's how I escaped—"

"Well. Surely you exaggerate."

He wept and wrung his hands: "The Beast. The Beast. It's feeding on your marrow."

He kept on mumbling of the Beast, its claws deep in his scalp. He shouted that the time had come for combat. The Elders grew alarmed. They visited to bring the Truth; it made no difference; nothing did; the devil rode that man. He made no sense at all.

"We pity you for your experiences," they told him carefully, while prodding him in the direction of the Holy Spirit. They thought up many tricks. They marshaled every deacon within sight and sneaked them in for chats.

Why not endeavor with an open heart what every sinner must endeavor: ask the good Savior for forgiveness; the Holy Ghost would do the rest?

That was their claim. They laid it out for him. They asked him to consider. Thanks to the mercies of the Savior, they pointed out to him, he and the girl, who stuck to him as though she were his shadow, had made it all the way into the Central Valley, where land was still dirt cheap.

Did not two villages make off in darkness and in snow, in sleighs, across the Amur River, while a violent blizzard beat down on the fleeing - a blizzard fierce enough to tear the blankets from their stakes? Had not the Lord saved them? Was that not proof of mercy? Where was his gratitude?

Come yet another anniversary, the Reedley churches hummed with thankfulness for such a miracle of Faith for weeks. The faithful said to him repeatedly: "Have Faith. Turn over your affairs to God." The doctor gave him tranquilizers.

They handed him the Bible. He held it upside down. He spelled freethinking, clearly. It was believed by not a few he might be what the Unitarians called agnostic. This untidy Christian caused genuine pain. He was a definite embarrassment to the community, and therefore he was hushed at every opportunity.

The Reedley folks told Erika: "Although he turned to solitude and meditative prayer, he never found relief." They wondered why there was no dispensation for this man—for what he saw or, worse, imagined when nightmares came and clung to him, thick as the tule fog, made him turn over in his sleep much like a piece of meat that sizzled on a bed of coals. He had barbs in his heart, and his tongue was in knots. For years on end, his anguish lit upon him like a swarm of wasps as he sat, studying his Bible—which he still did, when first he came, primarily to please his wife—although in later years, he sadly turned to writers that were secular, the dangerous inquiring spirit in control.

No wonder he became an irritant that proved too much for saints. The bravest deacons scattered.

He would pursue them, shouting after them: "What? Are you blind? Deaf? Dumb? The Beast is born! Its name is Cheka! Cheka! Cheka! The cobblestones around the Savior's Gate are black with people pleading to escape. And you? America? You're next! You're puppets of the banksters! You're fodder for the Jews."

This tale of Hebrew wickedness that had unleashed the Bolsheviks smacked of the seamy stuff of which the scandal sheets were made. It made the people wince. They would have none of that. Into the stillness, someone said: "Pardon us. Around here, we don't share that conviction."

They said to him so as to silence him: "Don't talk like that. Here in America, Jews have immunity. They're righteous citizens."

He argued one last time: "What you leave out of history is as important as what you put in—"

You couldn't hold such radical ideas in Reedley, California. You couldn't then, nor now, as Erika found out.

It was unfair, the Reedley people told the tape recorder, that this bedeviled man kept heaping blame on them and on America where times were bad indeed after the markets crashed. Consensus was: he had his chance. He could have had democracy in

Russia.

The verdict was: Some people dug themselves a hole, then sat in it, complaining. After the markets crashed, America itself was crumbling dreadfully. Bad times were sapping everybody's spirit, and there was little patience left for folks out of control.

It was survival, by that time, for any and for all. The Great Depression had engulfed and petrified them, lava-like. Therefore, when Josef Stalin rattled shut his borders, posting his silent guards with guns and bayonets, not one word in the *Fresno Bee.* Not one. There was no interest any more in distant Soviet Russia.

When Erika inquired: "How did the story end?" they told her one last time that the Mad Rooshian wouldn't come and bend his knee and seek forgiveness with the Savior. He wouldn't. He would not.

And so the Brethren Church where almost all the city fathers worshipped—this after giving the mad refugee more chances than he merited to put his house in order—agreed the deacons had no choice. The church disowned him in disgust. That is the Reedley story.

Year followed after year.

In time, the Baptists tried; their cooking was worth eating. And after that, it was the Methodists. The Presbyterians. And, last, the Unitarians. Nobody bore with him.

He even tried to join the Lutherans who did all things in threes—all their main hymns come in three stanzas, and thrice passed their collection plate.

He read through their Bible three times. His teaspoon kept on rattling in his cup.

His heart cried out for Faith, but Faith was gone; he never found it, though he looked—*ach*, how he looked! He kept on looking for the heart of God and found it, black as tar.

In the Depression years, the outcome was predictable. The Reedley people said to Erika: "This crazy Rooshian was the only one in our community who cheered the Führer on."

# Chapter 87

With the help of the Lord and her neighbors, Josie had managed to rescue the farm. She had learned to save penny on penny. She had a fine, strong head for numbers; she balanced her debits and credits. The Great Depression having taught her well, no longer did she purchase two of everything—she kept a shrewd eye out for bargains. She learned to cook a splendid three-course meal from nothing but a ham bone.

When visitors arrived to stay with Josephine, they slept in any bed that happened to be empty, and there were no surprises; her sheets were without creases.

She still read sentimental poetry on Liberty, Equality, Fraternity on chilly winter days as though to warm herself, but all in all, she voiced no more complaints about the sad lot of the poor, downtrodden masses, and that was fine with Mennotown. No longer did she move her furniture around to try out different angles. Her penny dreadfuls, once such tantalizing fare, now left her cold, whereas it was an uncle from Vancouver, whom she had never seen, who kept her busy weeks on end, and no complaints from Josie.

In summary, she learned her part in making do like everybody else, which was just wonderful. She took the weekend train when she went visiting said uncle for her part, because it was half fare, and that's how she returned.

That year, she also visited each of her daughters, and for the holidays she sewed for every one of them an apron, thus winning for herself the admiration and respect of the entire neighborhood. Her thoughts still ran deep while her knitting ran ladders, but the friction was gone, the alienation no more. Mennotown no longer mocked her, for her values, for the most part, had become the values of the clan.

To show appreciation in return, her relatives were tender and considerate. If a pretentious word slipped out of Josephine, no longer did they burst into loud laughter. It must not have been easy to forego metaphors and similes, since she was used to them, but Josie tried; she tried.

When Little Melly started taunting her to test her tolerance: "—your tea is kind of weak!" Josie did not grow pale as in the olden days when harmless needle pricks like that could jolt her to the core of her emotions. Instead, she said with a small laugh: "It's just your eyes. Or mine."

"Maybe."

"We're getting old."

"Well. Yes."

"We were both born before the motor car—" said Josephine, and gently poked her criticizing cousin in the stomach. " Why not admit it finally?"

"Just as I said. About your tea—"

"Oh, shush!" said Josephine who simply rose to put the kettle on and made another pot. Without another word.

Around her, there were many smiling faces.

The leaves were turning early. The men returned the tools to storage in the shed. Soon, winter came. The blessed holidays. The usual relatives came and departed. The distant relatives,

too, were invited to sit on the couch. They stayed for weeks on end and praised her *pfefferniisse* in many different ways, and she, like any housewife worth her salt, outdid herself with hospitality until they started staring out of windows:

"*Ach ja. Ach ja.* Just not the same as back in South Dakota."

She waved them off, relieved to see them go, but not before she heaped their hampers with cream cheese, sour cream and bits of rosy ham; she was that rich again. These rituals were no longer alien. She now adhered to them.

When the last visitor had left, she settled by the window; there still was time to read a bit before another spring arrived and with it, yet more guests.

The stock market crash had left little money for talent. Nobody taught Rarey to use the palette, but she moved it into her parlor. This was no time for luxury, but Josie insisted: "Right here. By the window."

"Can we afford this, Mom?"

She ruffled his hair in a shy, tender gesture, and her eyes filled with tears to the brim. "Can we afford this? Yes, we can. Of course we can. I know how to cut corners."

Her last-born was the nearest thing she ever owned of happiness. Would she deny herself? She watched her young son's progress much as she might have watched a train. The wheels of his talent were gathering speed. A force was propelling him on.

So what if her own life had stopped? His future was rosier than ever.

Things sprang to life on Rarey's canvas. His brushes trapped the wind, the silence of the flowers, the flicker of a candle, the smell of rain that hammered on the roof.

When other youngsters took up painting—and quite a few now did, in line with modern teaching theories that held a child should know how to surround himself with creativity—a tree looked like a tree, a house looked like a house. But it was different with Rarey. When you looked at a Rarey tree—why, you could smell the apple blossoms. You felt the sun smooth every

leaf. You sensed the air that rode the branches and made them arch and yield.

He painted. Josie watched.

Nobody knew the old flame smoldered on. Nobody sensed you could no more have changed this woman's nature than you could plow the sea.

She watched the seasons through her frosty window panes, and what she saw was this: No matter what the winter storms, spring came and started sprinkling daisies across the meadow greens as if by unseen hand.

Then followed muggy summer days. And then an early fall, dressed up in a cardinal red.

Here was the ticking of her thoughts: it wasn't yet every day's evening.

She asked Little Melly to dinner, incapable of doing things by halves. After dinner, both went to wash up, and then they came back and sat down.

Together, they sat now on Josie's lumpy davenport where Little Melly plied her cousin with examples from the Gospel to help her groom her spirit for the Savior's Gate that could swing open now, most any day, and let the sinner in. Archie sold funeral plots.

"A pain in my bladder. A stab in my kidney," whined Little Melly expertly. "And you, still in good health?"

"So far, so good."

"You cannot be too careful. That is my neighborly advice."

"I come from sturdy stock."

Josie joined two more uplifting community clubs to round out the rest of her life. She and her quibbling, criticizing cousin were not exactly bosom pals as yet, but finally at least on solid speaking terms, which was a joy to all.

How had so drastic a mutation come about? Because she still had Rarey. He was her valentine. If God made a cucumber, then Rarey painted it. A Rarey sky was not just blue but deep. A

Rarey lake was not just still but mystic.

She submerged herself in his talent. She was shy before her son's gifts.

Now that she had this last-born to herself, no longer did she have to live with vacant eyes and hungry heart. Now she was wealthy beyond words, like a convicted prisoner all of a sudden, unexpectedly released.

It was as if the Lord had given her a tonic that made her being well. And since the town had pardoned her, forgiven her, her heart felt peaceful at repose.

Her life no longer felt as though a giant feather quilt were suffocating it. She knew her last-born had a talent of great power that needed her support. If she regretted still her unused gifts, she did not dwell on that. She, too, was waiting for a seed to ripen, and what it would bring forth was anybody's guess.

She held his paintings up for others to admire. Most of the time, they did.

"His father would have been so proud," the townsfolk said indulgently, the memory of Jan still raw. "If only he had lived."

She said to Little Melly: "You can't fault me for that."

"For what?"

"For taking joy in Rarey."

Little Melly kept biting her lip, while forgetting the pain in her knee. Here showed that baleful trait again, as faint and deadly as the rattle of a snake. Here stood another door, still left a bit ajar.

"What's it to me?" sighed Little Melly. She was good at averting her gaze. "Though please forgive me when I say—"

"Go on. When you say what—?"

"—forgive me when I say that too much butter spoils the bread. That's just my own opinion."

But her merciless rancor had disappeared, too. Between them, a thaw had set in, for Josie had relinquished all her foreigners for good, chiefly the Finkelsteins. The spinster saw with her own eyes: the former champion of the underdog now kept herself

well to the right of everything and minimized things liberal.

Except for Rarey's brushes.

"My Rarey has that special quality: imagination," said Josephine, unable to let go.

"I guess he does—" sighed Little Melly, her own heart heavy with foreboding. She longed to say: "He needs to know about football and baseball," but fair was fair; her own shoe pinched as well: her Archibald had never quite caught on to the attraction of the other sex and could not always tell the difference between a football and a pumpkin. When it came to her tardy nephew, she watched her chance remarks.

Josie kept stitching away. "The Art Page was lavish in praise."

"Is that a fact?"

"I thought perhaps next time I go to Wichita—"

"You keep on spoiling him," said Little Melly, scolding mildly.

"Not really. I try not to."

"You aren't still pro-Wichita? Are you? Out with the truth! Mennotown's not good enough?"

But Josie only smiled to show she knew no guile, and swallowed what she thought.

In the decade of revival that followed Dewey's death and Jan's humiliating suicide, the neighbors learned to make allowances for Rarey's talent, too. That was no small concession, but gladly done in memory of Jan.

It was not easy for a growing teenager as talented as Rarey to walk precariously between tradition and modernity, between obedience and personality, much less become an expert in a field that was, in Mennotown, as far removed from practical existence as the moon.

But Rarey did what Josie never could: he struck that crucial balance. Thanks to a stubborn streak of gentleness he had inherited from Lizzy, he managed to succeed where Josie would have failed. He managed to keep both—his talent and the goodwill of his kin.

"I really don't deserve this honor," said Rarey modestly the day he won the Pumpkin Pie Award. But Josie saw: his blue eyes shone with pride. His face was warm and soft and fragrant as a bed of August hay.

She kept on gazing in his eyes and knew that nothing ever was so glowingly akin to her own spirit as the magic of his fingers that danced across the canvas. Still every inch a rebel, she could not help her pride, albeit in the interest of modesty she tried to keep her tongue. She was beside herself, as Rarey's honors heaped on honors, but careful in her excess.

"Be proud you won. Don't hide your gifts. Your talent is deserving."

And he rewarded her—nobody was as kind, nobody as well-mannered.

At fourteen years of age, he had his own exhibit. Times were still harsh, and life's necessities soaked up all hard-earned pennies, but even then, Josie's bitterest skeptics agreed: her son was the sensation of the day!

For this and other victories, she credited herself.

"The sky's the limit," she told the Embroidery Club, while sitting there, pride flushing the rim of her neckline, happily stitching away.

"Yet in the interest of humility—" the matrons pointed out, but she brushed that away. That was a tiny price to pay, to hold her tongue to snickers.

With the same thoroughness with which the old, defiant Josie espoused the causes of the liberals and Jews, she now embraced embroidery—as long as the clan loved her son, as long as they valued his talent.

Now that Joise knew her place, her gossip was amusing. She did her share of charity. She had good words for everyone. She welcomed strangers with a cheerful face, and relatives with shrieks. She took the Scriptures seriously. She battled mildew with a will.

German spices were back on grocery shelves, screened well

behind the kosher gherkins and the bagels, but Josie spiced her fried potatoes to the taste of all by mixing old and new.

Food fairs at the Topeka Unitarian Annual were now the latest rage, and Josie sent a pie. Gone were the days when Little Melly had to duck her head and wait until the furies passed! Gone were the times when Josie acted much like an exploding firecracker!

It was a bargain, in exchange, to let her young son have his way. "So be it," said the neighbors.

Thus, Rarey grew into a handsome youth. His teachers had nothing but praise.

His penmanship was good; his spelling was impeccable; his lettering, a wonder! This son of Josephine's who came to her in middle age, a prodigy, was still her precious prodigy, and she made no apologies for doodles.

A farmer tilled the soil again, obeying ancient rhythms, and family togetherness was in, and Rarey painted that. That selfsame farmer hoped to make a profit, and Rarey caught that feeling.

His talent was as effortless as breathing. The sunshine falling on a fertile earth, the purity of snow, the fragrance of a meadow, the simple joy of berrying—all that he captured on the cloth. He coaxed the purple shadows out of twilight. He who had never seen an ocean in his life could paint it, stroke by stroke, so that it roared and tossed and heaved when Josie looked at it.

One day she went to Wichita, peeked through the window of an orphanage, and came back with a playmate for her son.

The little female she imported into Mennotown had a fine head and dainty manners. She was as curly-haired and fragrant as a little lamb fresh from the April meadows. Her first name, Betty Lou. Her last name —well, you guessed it.

"Oh, no!" cried Little Melly, when she heard. She pulled Jan's youngster close to her as though to safekeep him.

But Josie said: "Her background shouldn't matter. She is in

need of a good home. She lost both parents to the influenza epidemic. Is there a finer place than Mennotown to raise an orphan girl?"

"But don't you think—"

"Luck and the Holy Spirit brought this small Hebrew child to us," said Josephine, while stepping round a cow pat, and deftly silenced all. She knew precisely how.

When Betty Lou, the girl whom Rarey grew to love, first came to Mennotown, in her possession nothing more than a small suitcase, tied cross-wise with a string, the truth was clear to more than just a few: no longer was your German heritage exclusively endorsed, which was just wonderful and Christian besides.

And with good cause: in Germany, there was a rising madman baiting every Jew, if you believed the *New York Times*, a paper many farmers read because it carried news about taxation and the likes—news that you couldn't do without, now that the bureaucrats were growing tentacles like mad.

The town was willing to give Betty Lou the benefit of every doubt. This young girl knew, as Josie did, that Rarey was exceptional. Things came to Rarey for the asking. She was a genuine believer in his gifts.

"Sit still for me," said Rarey. "I want to draw your curls." He sat, his note pad on his knees, and transferred with his quick, decisive strokes the countenance of her young face to paper. He filled five notebooks with her ringlets. He did a splendid job.

# Chapter 88

Jonathan felt no surprise when he discovered, while leafing through some brittle parchments, the dusty road that brought his peasant ancestors to Apanlee.

He set four weeks aside to study his family tree. He was proud of his Apanlee roots. He verified with choking pride the old, Teutonic traits his people had brought all the way from the Vistula swamps to Russia's fertile acres to grow the wheat the color of sunsets of gold.

He filled himself with tales about his forebears' odd, unbending ways, their tribal dignity, their sense of duty and obedience to Caesar and to God.

Not murky, their standards and habits: Their world was black and white.

Ah, how it fit! How deeply meaningful it was!

When he looked back, he saw bleak days and bleaker nights. His past had been one great, gray ocean with no horizon whatsoever on which to anchor hope. Now, thanks to Heidi and her creed—thanks to his much-beloved Führer—his future lay before him much like a cotton field: inviting, vast, and ready to be

plucked.

In years to come—years rich in sight and sound—Jonathan would weld himself repeatedly in word and deed to duty and obedience unto death. He did this long before he came of combat age, awed by the solemn pageantry.

He wore the brown-shirt uniform at first, then graduated to field-gray, a color more becoming to a man. He wore black, sturdy shoes, black stockings, shorts, a trench cap tucked into his belt. He vowed repeatedly: "If need be, I will give my life for my beloved Führer—" but he meant Apanlee.

Back in his thoughts was always, always Apanlee.

He did all his assignments willingly—the kind of work that built his self-esteem—and he was not alone. Those were the days when all who could, were shouldering their spades. He relished the rigorous training. No task could exhaust his resources.

He rose with the roosters, made up his bunk, showered, did knee bends, and headed for the fields where wheat was heading strongly; the rye was ripening; the corn already stood two feet high.

The plums grew in season; soon, cornflowers, poppies, buttercups had faded.

Fall came. He helped another farmer plow the stubble under.

His limbs were straight; his voice was strong; a ruddy glow lay on his handsome face. His very heart was bronzed. In the haymaking season, he turned the hay; he piled it, shook it, hauled it in before the rain; he lay in it, absorbed the scent, and dreamed: peace on earth, and goodwill to upright, honest, and hard-working men!

He and his comrades built enormous fires to warm the frosty night. They raked potatoes, hot and tasty, from the ashes.

This must be understood: things were not shrill and mean when hope was young in Germany. The people looked around and saw with their own eyes: the food was swaying in the breeze. The wheat stood in fine head.

The hungry winters—gone!

The Führer spoke about a Reich that would endure a thousand years. His voice was the clarion call. They saw he was an earnest man, a leader to God's liking. He marshaled evidence and set it forth for others to admire. He plucked the urchins from the streets and put them in clean uniforms. Bells pealed from steeples joyously. May Day parade beneath a flag-draped city gate was plain magnificent. The fire of Faith lit all faces: a sky without doom; streets that were safe; police forces rounding up ration card swindlers.

The Führer told the men of Germany: "Work all the overtime you want—" and workers spit into their hands, rolled up their sleeves and went to built the Autobahn.

The Führer's voice rose, by and by: "You need to understand what you are up against, as well as what you're fighting for. Learn how to hit back hard!"

He shouted: "Scat, racketeers and Communists!" and a Hebrew developed a hiccup that lasted for several days.

This was about renewal. Honor. Decency. Integrity. Wholesome communities. Old values, dusted off, renewed. The people told each other, brooding: "The merchants and the moneylenders? Check your own bankster out; he lost his mask: his true face is revealed."

The Führer pointed out: "While you were struggling in the mire and your own children had no schools nor pencils, a certain people hoarded so much gold they could afford to take their poodles to a training school for dogs."

The Führer stood and smiled, a warm light in his eyes, and when the crowds cheered madly, he looked just like a tree that grew straight from German soil and started spreading shade.

A blind man saw he wore the garb of honor. A deaf man heard the drums of destiny. The crustiest old-timers, by nature skeptical, Faith gone in God and men, who scarcely even knew at first what all the shouting was about, now stared into their beer, forked their potato salad, and broodingly proclaimed:

"Say what you will. Now we have order in the streets of

Germany."

Such was the sentiment. The Führer promised justice for the righteous, a paycheck for the diligent, and prison for the louts. Who could have argued? No one. More and more folks, sipping their beer and staring thoughtfully into the foam, discovered salty words for scoundrels and connivers.

Before the Führer started freeing Germany, enslaved by choking reparations for a lost war, the country lay in chains, the future held no hope—but now the lemonade barrels rolled in. The prices of meat and bread fell. The mail came in regular batches. The trains no longer stalled on sidings; they moved with energy, emitting clouds of steam, and they were heated trains, affordable. The Führer understood the working man whose shoes badly needed resoling. The Führer said precisely what Dewey used to say to Josephine, when he coaxed her to heed the call of blood and to reject the Finkelsteins. Here's what the Führer said: "A straight nose is not crooked. You do not try to mix what nature made distinct."

He gathered his captives like sand. All Germany stood, flushed, with promise and with hope, and young and old stood once again, united, offering thunderous applause to the man who had banished despair, who now ushered in a more honest, more healthy tomorrow.

And long before the decade closed, there stood a youth at every corner, his arm raised in salute, among them Jonathan.

He held the Führer's flag aloft, and never did a heart hold more goodwill and love for clan and kin and race. Some might have shouted their approval of the Führer from mere exuberance of youth, others by example or from habit, but it was different for Jonathan. When Jonathan saluted flag and Führer, he did so with a reverence that centuries of strict obedience to a higher power had bred into his genes.

He stood tall for inspection. He wore his badge with pride. His nails were clean, his trousers without creases. His bed was tightly made, his rucksack packed, his list of tasks lay neatly folded

in his pocket. The Hitler Youth report said he was ready to command a squad, and Heidi took him by the shoulders and moved him to the window.

"Why, let me look at you."

She was so proud of Jonathan that she arranged to have his picture taken, next to her tulip bed. She took her last spare penny and summoned a photographer. That picture still exists. It shows that on that day, she wore a fine, starched collar. She stood right next to Jonathan, the kindergartner Lilo riding in the crook of his right arm, both arms around his neck.

Before the decade died, the Führer brought back folklore and tradition, and all the faithful knew: "A man of God. The true elect of God. Lo, we have waited for him."

He flew as the eagle that hastens to hunt. His horses were swifter than cheetahs, fiercer than ravening wolves. He gathered to himself all nations, heaped to himself all peoples. Like the hammer of Thor he arrived.

He said: "No more dead children in latrines, so help me God! So help me God!" and belt buckles snapped into place, jackboots sparked on the cobblestones.

"Just yesterday," the Führer pointed out, "your cattle starved; your horses fell; your children cried with hunger; the grief did not diminish. And now?"

He didn't bare his teeth as though he were the Beast, as legend has it now. He radiated confidence. He spread warm hands amid the multitudes. He was engaging and polite. He told his people, quietly: "I do not crave affection. I only want respect," but love flowed like a river. His name on their lips was like honey.

"All that was in the Bible", say those who lived those days. All that came from the pages of the Good and Trusted Book: he stood and measured the earth; he looked and startled the nations. As Erika plucks from old lips forgotten patriotic feelings out of the driftwood that was yesterday, the words are still: "Say what you will. He was a charismatic leader. World leaders envied him

his certainty of step."

Let Hollywood insist, they say while dabbing at their eyes, that their beloved Führer, in the end, became a monster who would traffic death for pride, and turn his people's sons and daughters' eyelids into lead. They say: "All that is such a lie! It's just a lie! A lie!"

Gone were the horror-haunted days, sprung from the minds of usurers, born from the teeth of hell!

Before the Führer's followers fled pestilence, rapacity and filth. The smoldering torches spoke loudly: of right triumphing over wrong, of light dispelling fog, of strength over mind-bending muddle. Helmets, guns and backpacks were everywhere for people to admire as youth formations, fresh-garlanded, marched on until the streets ran out of cobblestones. Young children waved their flags at them until their arms were sore, and pretty maidens stuffed the muzzles of their rifles with red roses.

"Ah, but his wickedness would scorch the earth," says Hollywood today, "and thus make converts flock to him to be his willing vassals, as though a letter had been branded on their brows."

"That's wrong," the Führer's former freedmen say. "That's simply wrong. That's Hollywood."

Their Führer said repeatedly: "I have received my mandate from the almighty hand of God." When Dewey spoke like that in Mennotown with smug familiarity in the Depression days, nobody took offense. When Archie makes that claim, today, right on your television screen, nobody takes offense.

So it was in those early days in Germany. The Führer didn't have Dewey's receding chin, potbellied look, hair growing from his ears. He asked repeatedly, convincingly: "Why not unite against the foe? His avarice is bottomless."

He asked: "Why else that only yesterday, if not for them, did millions not suffice to buy a single match?"

He said: "Let there be no mistake. We're locked in mortal struggle. While honest farmers strove to live from meager har-

vests, the Hebrews carted off their gold."

And in the end, he said: "We cannot co-exist."

The Führer never tired of the topic of the Jews, and there he touched a nerve that had been raw for centuries. The people now took stock.

Who else was always taking money from the pockets of the innocent and salting it away? Who else said prayers backwards and kept their squalid secrets hidden in their lodges? Who else had torched the Reichstag in at least two dozen different places? Who else was bleeding Germany for endless reparations?

The Führer said repeatedly: "So help me God! So help me God!"

He said: "An end to exploitation."

He said: "So. Help. Me. God!"

"I'll turn this country right side up," the Führer said, and the applause was thunderous. Wherever he unfurled his flag, the riffraff just scurried for cover.

"You have your *Hogan's Heroes* here," says Mimi now. "Show me a Nazi in America. Caricatures at best, satanic at their worst. We had ours, too—in films, cartoons and songs."

They didn't march; they shuffled. They plotted and they schemed. They made unwary people dance like puppets on a string. There was nothing redeeming about them.

The Führer asked: "You need an explanation for these past, destructive years that brought your parent's lives to ashes?"

Into the lull of heavy thoughts, the Führer's words fell, sharp: "While decency was dying, who sucked the life blood out of you to fill their bloated bellies?"

The workers stared into their beer: "Their actions and intentions, fouler than rat-infested cheese."

Why else, but for their guilty purposes, were Jews all of a sudden hiding jewelry and watches?

Why else, before the year was out, could Jews not visit public libraries and were the only ones to need delousing papers?

Why else did they shave off their beards and fuss about their side locks?

Why else—through all the centuries—had honest people blamed the Jews for every single woe?

"Look overseas," the Führer pointed out. "And draw your own conclusions."

Who cooked up the Depression?

Who ran the banks and presses?

Who preened in minks and sables while honest people rummaged through the trash?

The Führer said: "They're aliens in our midst. Their fiendish ingenuity, their intricate capacity to plot and scheme and damage honest work will soon be manifest to many. "

He made short shrift of humdrum homilies about such thinngs as wisdom's resting in the bosom of the people. He said: "Democracy? A tool concocted by the Jews so they can oversee the bureaucrats to loot the featherbrains." By then, it did not take the Führer's frown to point them out to you—the wreckers, the connivers.

That was the sentiment. In every country where the Hebrews dwelt, the people hated them. The moment when you shone the light on them, they scampered for the dark.

You didn't reckon with the Führer, did you, Israel?

You thought that you could drip with jewels, Sarah, while Germany was cringing in the dirt?

The Führer understood his people's dreams—dreams shattered in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles where men with gold and silver in their names and on their fingers had pocketed their children's rights. The Führer promised he would break the chains of slavery, and they trembled for joy at the news. To hear the Führer's explanations was just like watching rushing waster—it washed clean the murky depths. The wounded found healing, the tormented, peace; the dishonored discovered their pride.

The masses spoke as though they had one voice:

Bloodsuckers, all!

Polluters, all!
Out, Antichrist! Get thee behind me now!

Before another year was gone, the Jews were forced to tip their hats and step off the sidewalk into the gutter while the Führer stood high on a mountain and measured the earth with his thoughts. He spoke, and he startled the nations. He showered clarity across the land as though he poured a bowl of mercury.

He told his people, day by day: "We'll rid ourselves forever of the vermin," and silent men, still crusted with the dirt of many hopeless seasons, climbed on their chairs to get a better look. They stamped their feet and shouted: "He puts the snake right on the table! He calls a spade a spade. He calls a hoax a hoax!"

The message did not change. There was no subtlety, no shilly-shallying. The buckle on the Führer's belt spoke of a wrathful God, intent on retribution. The Führer said repeatedly, hypnotically, that God was on his side.

Around him, soldiers formed a wall.

He told the milling masses: "I promise solemnly to the Almighty God that the hour will arrive when victory will come again to our violated land." He pointed out the mastermind behind the global misery: he pointed a stiff finger at the lodges. Who was it that had toppled thrones? Who gnawed forever at the roots of every honest government? The planet shrieked with agony—and they? Bejeweled and corrupt!

So let them now disgorge their dollars and their diamonds! Why, let them scrub the lavatories with their detested prayer shawls!

"Like lice that carried typhus," the Führer told the people, "the Hebrews carried Bolshevism in their blood, infecting and weakening gullible people, and to what horrible result? Just look at Russia!"

The papers were full of hurrahs. The endless throngs marched on in never-ending columns. The world started quaking in awe. The people wildly tore the posters down, spit on the pentagram, and shredded the hammer and sickle.

# Chapter 89

"You aren't you," the Führer said in broadcast after broadcast. "Only they are fit to live who are unafraid to die. Something greater and nobler than you will be born."

There was much talk of death for the sake of a higher ideal, but that, for Jonathan, was strictly theory. He yearned to live; he felt as though he were walking through life on bare feet.

He learned to pitch a tent. He learned to read a map. He hiked and drilled and sang. The Führer filled his heart with honor, pride and discipline and gave him the oneness with genuine comrades, all freshly uniformed, all poised for the upcoming battle.

"If Providence should call on me to make the supreme sacrifice, I will not hesitate," said Jonathan to Heidi, who had nothing specific to say in reply. She had a way of noticing the things she wanted to observe and turning blind, deaf, dumb to things she wanted to ignore.

He sat in Heidi's spotless kitchen and bit into her apfelstrudel, and they began to talk.

She said to him: "The movement is gathering strength."

He told her with a chuckle: "Say, have you heard this one?

Three Jews were sitting on a porch, and one of them said to the other two—"

"Nonsense," said Heidi, sharply. "Our doctor was a Jew. Our dentist was a Jew. The Führer took them both into protective custody."

He said no more that day. She was a woman and, hence, soft. She was the kind who would be menaced by a sunburn when everybody else would tan. He felt her searching silences, but his reality was timeless: the eagle was chasing the fox.

By then, Jonathan had grown into a man. He knew with flawless certainty: had not the Führer come and started cleaning up, the Antichrist would have, by now, grinned down from every rooftop—not just at Apanlee, not in the Fatherland alone, but in all the rest of Europe.

Word spread.

The roosters woke the cows.

The cows woke up the horses.

The trumpets of Jericho blew.

The Führer's flyers, too: they came in full force and full color. Drab telephone poles became beribboned candy canes. The people kept tapping their feet.

The Führer cried: "I am a man of God—" and thousands fell under his spell, and millions repeated his vision.

He stretched an iron arm and shouted: "I am your voice. Your unifying symbol is now the Mystic Cross."

Before it fled the Fiend.

The Führer took twin lightning runes and put them side by side.

For the gray masses in the Fatherland, still dumb with terror, who had heard Satan howling, having sprung across the borders out of an ashen Russia, the Führer was the Healer, the Messiah. They watched him throttle the Red Menace—the common enemy of all!—that had sprung out of hell.

The Führer and his Cross were one. The window panes stopped trembling. The Revolution of the usurers no longer roared through the dilapidated neighborhoods and barren streets of Ger-

many.

He promised: restitution for what has been thieved. Atonement for what has been done.

He said: "How? You ask how? Shoulder to shoulder and comrade for comrade, that's how!"

He shouted: "Not in my country can you find one mollycoddle!" and tore up the treacherous treaty. He swept the posters with the hammer and the sickle into the trenches left over from the First World War. He swore he would reclaim the Rhineland. His glance fell on the Corridor. He shouted: "Repeat after me. Death has no meaning. The Fatherland is all."

A Jew drowned himself in the Wannsee.

"It will be war, and not a party," the Führer had declared, and that was fine with Jonathan. The sun was hot, the shadows sharp, and Jonathan took sides.

He watched the Führer forge his armies with energy and foresight, and thrilled to see it done. Flags hung from every tree. The corrupt days died slowly, one by one, beneath the pageantry and joyous marching music.

The only things that made life worthwhile living now were values honed to steel by previous generations. Faith. Order. Diligence. Strength. Pride, once again, in race and Fatherland and blood.

"Firm discipline," the Führer said, "must nail us to our duties. And let's be clear. From now on, every order will be backed by force." Appeals to fate and destiny were frequent.

"There is no doubt about our sacred mandate," the loudspeakers proclaimed, strung tree to tree to tree.

The words may read like bloated boasting now, thanks to the muck and slime that slops incessantly from Hollywood to choke all deep, true passion, but words were spoken, heard and acted on, back then, as solemn as the flag salute that the Rotarians proffered up in Mennotown when they partook in their own rituals that aimed, no less, at bettering their world. To crack a joke about one's duty to one's soil would have been heresy in Mennotown—and so it was in Germany, for liberation's sake, when a war seemed

a foregone conclusion.

Somebody said: "They call this war?" and many people laughed.

The Führer minced no words. His eyes were sharp and wary. He spoke against the wind: "We are united in a common task. I did not raise my young folk to pick peaches."

There was no doubt in Jonathan. He was part of this glorious crusade. Bonfires glowed like liquid amber through the branches, and in his deepest marrow he knew that all was clean and good.

That this would be a Holy War against the Antichrist was clear. The Führer's planes were dropping flyers by the score that told the frightened border people that anybody honest, loyal, righteous had nothing to fear from the Wehrmacht. No shells would fall on peaceful acres. The *Landsers* planned no harm.

The multitudes believed. The crowds took up the chant. The Führer would not fail his people; he was their voice; he had their trust; he took their shame away and handed them their pride.

The Führer's planes kept floating on the wind as though they were but toys. The engines cascaded white steam. Trains, hung with flags and garlands, whistled through the countryside. Ships, loaded with emergency supplies, plowed through the foaming sea. Trim girls on bicycles waved happily at handsome soldiers as panzer spearheads started ripping through the fields.

Factories sang iron melodies.
Propellers started sucking air.
Huge motors started howling.
Guns bellowed, and horizons started smoking.

When his beloved Führer ordered war, Jonathan stood at attention, repeating: "I'll fight until my cartridges are gone."

He solemnly put on the *Landser's* hallowed garb. His hobnailed marching boots echoed through the streets of his adopted Fatherland, as they had done in previous generations: the world would fall to its power; the traitors would fall to their knees. Away with usurers and parasites! Away with liars, cheats and renegades! Scat, bloodsuckers! Scat, slime and ooze and muck!

He had become this country's son, this country's trusted future. That this must come by means of blood and steel, he knew. That message soaked into his pores. It did not frighten him. He was content, for he stood hardened to necessity—to die, if need be, for the sake of a higher ideal.

"God willing, we will win," said Heidi, mildly religious in intimate moments.

"Of course we will. A brand new Germany is rising!"

"Yes. With the Führer on your right and God Almighty on your left, how can you lose?"

"Life is a shadow play," was Jonathan's reply.

He had no God; he vaguely suspected that Heidi didn't either. Wherever Heidi walked, the world became her church. She made no show of piety when armament began. The church pews were uncomfortable; besides, there was no time; she briskly went to work. She started with a row of special Führer benefits. Inviting the entire neighborhood, she had five sunrise breakfasts in a row to start an orphan fund.

Time passed. Years flew. Heidi's strudel was making the rounds; Lilo was having a birthday. The little girl had grown into a teenager.

She knew Berlin like the back of her hand. She knew not idleness; she made the most of charm and opportunities. She was the finest sweater girl a soldier could imagine. In a white apron and a cook's cap, she did canteen duty twice a week at the Red Cross where she filled cups with scented tea and learned to give first aid.

She was fast friends with Jonathan. He said to her, to tease her: "I guess I'll have to punish you for not saluting me?"

She was filling his thermos with unsweetened tea. She spoke straight from an unbridled tongue: "You are as silly as a pair of knickers."

Nothing stopped Lilo when things burned on her tongue. The devil was in her that morning.

"The Führer would scalp me if only he knew," she said with flaming face, "but here is what I think: I'd rather have a coward

sitting at my table than a hero in the grave—"

He looked at her, astonished. "I didn't hear that, Lilo."

"Of course you didn't, Jonathan."

"I'm counting on you when I'm gone," he told her awkwardly. "Now, don't you start crying. Everybody's happy, and here you start crying?"

"She's a handful, Jonathan," said Heidi, fighting tears. "She's growing up. She's full of contradictions. She says one thing and means another. She meant to tell you, Jonathan: 'Watch out for your own safety.' We want you to come back. Here. Here's an extra pair of socks for you, deep in this zipper bag."

He watched and could not have his fill of Heidi. He loved her now as ever, though in her aging face, fine wrinkles ran every which way. She was no longer the young girl who wore a golden coronet, an ear of wheat pin on her collar, a wondrous angel sent to earth to pick him from the gutter. She had three draft-age sons.

He made a big to-do about her recipe, and Heidi hamstered every crumb of praise. Despite the fading shafts of light, it was a happy day. Not much had changed; the sweet tension between them never slackened, although he never raised his hand to touch her graying hair. Not once.

"God willing," said Heidi, several times, voicing nothing special or specific. She was no slave to church or cult, but she insisted on her daughter's confirmation—still two years away. And even Lilo was no less a patriot than ever the Lord had made. Despite her reckless tongue, she saw the Führer flag and trembled with emotion. The day was tranquil, almost lazy, and Heidi served coffee and cookies. Love, trust and Faith—above all, Faith!—shone out of Heidi's eyes like candles.

To break the tension, he asked slowly: "I never asked you this before. Why did you take me in?"

"I liked you, Jonathan."

"The odds were all against you. You didn't know that I would ever pay you back."

"Ah, but I did. I did. Deep down, I saw the pride of generations."

He kept on smoking hungrily. She watched how his cigarette diminished; ashes growing at the tip, suspended in the air. His hand trembled ever so slightly. Outside, a youth formation passed by the open window singing:

*"Ein junges Volk steht auf zum Sturm bereit,*
*Haut die Schranken doch zusammen, Kameraden—"*

She said: "Be careful now. I want you to come back."

He gave her a thin smile. "This is a sacred war against the force of darkness. It's providence. It's destiny. As if you didn't know."

She had not changed at all, though she was older, wiser now. She chose her words with care. "I want you to come back. A bullet could come flying. Trench warfare is no picnic."

He told her, speaking calmly: "You may be sure I'll sell my life as dearly as I can."

He knew his destiny as though it had been hewn in stone. His duty was to fling the Mystic Cross as far as strength permitted and hook it deep into the soil for which his forebears died. He all but felt its spikes on his own skin as they moved stealthily.

She leaned toward him lovingly while fastening a button. "Here. Don't forget your thermos bottle." He caught a whiff of her clean hair and resisted an impulse to touch it.

She spoke shyly, avoiding his eyes. "And don't forget. Your place is here. In Germany."

"I know. But not before I take back what was mine."

She reached for his hand then. She started stroking it. "Where did you get this scar?"

He rubbed the indentation. It was a strange phenomenon: whenever the drums started rolling, the scar started itching like mad.

"A little cousin, thrice removed, bit me out of sheer terror. Her name was Mimi. Mimi Neufeld. I've often wondered what might have happened to that child." He stood within a trembling silence, still in his ears the thudding blows of anarchy. Each blow from twenty years ago that fell on Dorothy, supine across that zinc container, was still engraved upon his spine, within the very sinews of his will. His finger was already twitching for the

trigger.

He said: "The Soviet Union is a sluggish giant, shot through and through with Hebrew thought. The sun takes an entire day to cross it. We'll need, at most, three weeks."

The question she had never asked began to swell inside her. Both felt it, hanging like a sword. She tried to force it out between clenched teeth but found that she could not. He read her thoughts. He answered her obliquely.

"We cannot co-exist."

"Don't look for the hardest possible path."

He shrugged while drumming with his knuckles. It was late August now, but for him, this was June, a dream. "We'll make sure the Red Peril will break every tooth." He knew with steely clarity one single, red-hot point: were it not for the Führer and his might, a sea of red would have, by now, washed over all of Europe. He said again: "We have no choice. We cannot co-exist."

She put both hands around his face. He cupped them with his own. There was no need for words.

This, too, is now forgotten. How genuine it was. How sweet and virginal it was.

That day in Heidi's kitchen, as he bid her good-bye, he was again a hungry, frozen boy; she the young woman, pregnant with the future, wearing red patent leather shoes. He owed her everything. He longed to tell her that. With diligence and discipline, along with soap and brush, she had cast out the evil spirits that plagued a skinny guttersnipe whose belly hurt with hunger, whose ears still heard the thuds of anarchy.

"A soldier follows orders," said Jonathan, to hide that he was still in love with her; he still drank in her scent—though Heidi looked that day as wrinkled as an apple, forgotten in the oven, and left to bake too long. The future had stopped passing through her body.

Long after he was gone, she sat there, with her thoughts, alone, within the fading daylight, sewing.

# Chapter 90

As Kansas people watched the German Führer's gamble from afar, they were informed in detail about his hatred, enmity and greed. "A bug that has the bite of fire," the *New York Times* declared.

Some papers said: "A fraud."

Some shrieked: "A fool."

Some even howled: "A maniac."

The editorial cartoons were raw and vicious and maligning. The scribblers hinted that, once more, the Germans were dropping poisoned sweets because they hated children.

This was bad news for Mennotown, with the dachshund barely back in fashion, and the image of the kaiser still festering in many people's memory, particularly Archibald's.

"The devil incarnate," enunciated Archibald, while milk dried on his mustache.

And he was not alone, making his feelings known about the so-called Führer, as he was represented to the masses, thanks to the *New York Times.*

"That man knows what he wants. No cloak and dagger business," said Doctorjay, for instance. "Once he rolls up his sleeves, watch out! You know precisely where he stands. You know precisely what he'll do. He isn't wishy-washy."

Doctorjay still doctored in his spare time when the spirit moved him thus. Among his clientele for Doctorjay's Ready Relief, that's where he made known his opinions.

"A rattler at your feet!" cried Archibald as well. "The Rooshians and the Huns alike, a bunch of hooligans!"

Archie hated Adolf Hitler with a vehemence that made his left eye gleam. "Half-man, half-fag," said Archie with a jerky motion of his shoulder.

"Don't talk like that," admonished Little Melly who didn't like blue words. The dark side of the facts of life was still a mystery to her. Such things did not happen in Kansas.

"That's right! Look! Look who's talking now!" The ham in Doctorjay would not leave him alone. He had not changed a bit; the truth jumped from his tongue, though he himself was far from perfect. It was no secret to most folks he needed Abigail's goodwill on patriotic holidays to get himself to bed. He still kept toasting every star and stripe, enjoying all his handshakes, quaffing from his bottle, helping himself to more of Lizzy's Cheese slivers than was good for his doddering liver.

"Let's gun the Hun!" cried Archibald, and Doctorjay joined in: "Let's drink to that! Hey! Bottoms up! Remember? Bottoms up?"

The neighbors nodded sagely while visiting with Doctorjay to listen to the radio and hear the latest news, while Archibald sat, fuming. You would have thought that this was Archie's war, he was that overwrought. In church, where Archibald preached interim, he prayed for all his enemies but made a point of skipping over Germans. He couldn't wait for Saturday—that's when he checked himself into the flicker crowd so he could watch the helmets.

When it appeared the Methodists of Mennotown were grow-

ing powerful, intent on eclipsing the Creed, Archie thundered from the pulpit that the Methodists were his decided enemies as well and could never be anything else. The Baptists, too, were slowly gaining in the local confidence, and Archie, sensing the emergency, stepped zealously into his preacher father's shoes. That status gave him lots of opportunities to keep his good eye on the motes in other people's eyes while avoiding the beam in his own.

Dim rumors clung to Archibald and would not go away.

He had inherited none of his mother's robust traits, but all of Dewey's zeal. On Sundays and on holidays, he preached with scarlet tongue, but in his everyday endeavors he was timid, prone to small touches of malice, and his feelings were constantly hurt. But as he grew in certitude, he toed the safety line, and when it came to cleaning up the vineyards of the Lord, he roused himself to such thunderous roars he left no doubt just where he stood: fair-square against all moral compromise.

"Mortification of the flesh is still of great importance," pontificated Archibald, who wore a rhinestone watch and several pinkie rings, and dropped a casual hand into a perfect stranger's lap, where it lay, glittering.

Despite his oddities, the congregation had accepted him because he promised them the Pearly Gates, and they, in turn, made sure he was well-rested and well-fed.

Each Sunday, rain or shine, he occupied the sleek and glossy pulpit vacated by his father, though many people thought, and told him so in private, that he unrolled his Sunday morning homilies on the temptations of the flesh in more rambunctious ways than even Billy Sunday did, when thirty years before, he socked it home to Satan. But Archie didn't take advice concerning moral compromise. He shouted guilt and penitence and brimstone and damnation, while Kansas sweltered in the heat.

"And he, so mild in all his endeavors," they said of him, indulging. The volunteers doted on him. The faithful kept on filling his collection plate, providing succor for the poor today and for themselves a better afterlife tomorrow, and all was well

enough.

Patience was the watchword now with Archie's eccentricities. He, for his part, knew on which side his bread was buttered, and never dropped the slice in such a way so as to spoil his meal.

In summary, in every way that counted, he was a churchly man and faithful to old habits—except that he sleep-walked through manhood. Archie's love life—as bald as an egg!

By contrast, Betty Lou and Rarey made proper headway in the matter of romance and now were widely recognized as the decade's most watched and envied cupids. The plan was: they would marry as soon as the girl came of age.

In the quiet, uneventful years between the Great Depression and the beginning of the European war, Rarey and the curly-headed youngster that Josie tucked into the ethnic quilt of Mennotown, grew up together peacefully, and now she was in love with Rarey, and he in love with her. It was well-known that Rarey could have had most any pious girl in Mennotown—indeed, in the entire state of Kansas!—but he chose Betty Lou, a girl emitting a soft radiance.

She waited until she was given permission to speak. She hurried to finish the dishes.

She did that without being asked, which won her the town folks' approval. They liked her well enough. She had no major flaws. But when she washed her hair, it curled around her face like crazy.

She sat nearby for hours, while he sketched. She deepened her dimples at him. She liked those home-cooked meals. She settled in and stayed.

He was consumed with perfecting his strokes. His brushes fashioned magic in a town where pig squeals were the norm.

"You may not want to mix, but you should treat them well," said even Little Melly. "They're humans. Aren't they? Like everybody else?"

Music to Josie's ears!

That kind of ethnic tolerance would have been rare just yesterday, but now the nosy neighbors only smiled the day the youngsters kissed each other, right on the sidewalk, in broad daylight. Unbidden thoughts came back like mushrooms after rain, but Josie squelched them all.

"A genuine love match," said Josie.

"Next thing you know, the Negroes will cross over," said Little Melly carefully to no one in particular and wiped a drop of gravy from her chin. The outskirt Donoghues were multi-marrying as well, as Archie put it coyly. While giving it nary a thought. Thus sweetening the dole. Their colors mixed and matched. Their brood just multiplied.

"No! Never! That will never happen," said Josie tranquilly, and settled down to feast on yet another purple novel.

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure. I'm absolutely sure."

"Modernity is marching on."

Josie counted the cracks in the ceiling. She felt no contradiction; her values were in place; she just held onto them and didn't move an inch: this was America where everybody was as good as everybody else. She had no doubts about her kind of town. Equality! Fraternity! And Liberty!

How she rejoiced in seeing them come back, the liberal ideas she had so championed in her salad days. Now that a war was on, all that was back in fashion. The old world knew no better, had erupted in fire and flame and racial ill-will, but Mennotown's America still was as it should be: a country where you had a chance, as long as people stuck together and pulled in one direction instead of frittering their strength.

Hard-scrabble days were past. Equality was in.

While Betty Lou and Rarey were busy making wedding plans, Little Melly fussed and bickered, poked and prodded, for Archie still remained a timid bachelor despite the fleshiest females she pushed right in his path—and not just Temperance, for such was her Christian name.

She, Doctorjay, and Betty Lou were sitting on the porch one day when Archie came to join them.

"I said to her, to Temperance: 'He will get over everything.' I said to her: 'Once he is married safely—'"

"A fine one, you, to speak."

"What's that supposed to mean? Don't be so sure you can catch up once you're behind in age."

"Just don't start that again."

Little Melly looked at her nephew more keenly. "Take a good look at her. I said, 'take a good look at Temperance.' A girl that lives within walking distance. As rosy and as shiny as a ham. Now is as good an opportunity as any."

Archie chewed on a hangnail, while Little Melly served coffee with those familiar, churning feelings in her stomach that signaled a gastric disorder. Telling her to lay off now was telling her to die.

She launched herself with gusto. She poked her nephew with her finger. "She's rich in curves, both fore and aft."

Doctorjay began to gasp with mirth. She hushed him with a piercing look: he was incorrigible.

"Just think: a baby—warm as toast." She knew whereof she spoke. She had nursed many plans for Archibald, and they included cradles as well as eldership.

But Archie merely curled his lip and culled out of his trouser pocket a piece of chewing gum to show his ingrained nonchalance in matters of romance. He was like that. He did not fit in. He fell into step behind the old order, and yet, he was marching alone. If he continued on that path, his life was rigged for anguish.

Little Melly pointed out: "She's perfect, Archibald. Well on the road to overweight."

"I know. I know. She is sufficiently rotund."

She hated that. Here was another habit she disdained. Archie often spoke like that. Quaint. Dandified. She watched him in brittle silence. There were additional disturbing signs you could pick up in Archie if you looked carefully. When he was

overstressed, he mumbled to himself. He savored gossip like a woman. A ladder gave him vertigo. He took scant pains with his mustache but lots about his daffodils. He liked to have his neck and ears rubbed gently. He turned white at a worm in an apple.

No doubt that he was sissified. Such things were ruining him. She gathered every clue up with a quaking heart.

"God spoke an ultimatum once again," said Little Melly one last time while helping Archie put the final touches on yet another funeral. "There is a lesson here." She liked to say bright things like that to Archie.

He looped a twisted smile. "Not now. I have a toothache. Please."

She was not easily deceived. She watched him with a shrewd maternal eye, then launched herself more forcefully. She had her blueprints all mapped out, and was not coy with them.

"Don't change the subject, Archie. I speak from long experience. What's Easter without colored eggs? What's Christmas without stockings? What's life if you can't leave your lessons to posterity? The only thing you lack is a good wife to give you enough children to carry on your work."

He said something impossible. He liked to shock her with his purple words, a disconcerting habit.

"Don't be a smart-ass, Archie. You are a dandy, aren't you? Don't bait your aunt like that."

But all her efforts fizzled. Adroitly, Archie took himself out of harm's way by pleading yet another altruism drive for yet another charity to escape further arguments, but not before he pointed out to her from Solomon the Christian difference between clean fun and sinful longings. He did this cleverly, as crafty as a flivver salesman swapping words.

But on the other hand, now that she thought of it, he had a way of skipping over David and Bethsheba that was completely baffling.

For quite some time, Archie held his own against the siege.

He made the rounds at the Rotary Clubs. He had sufficient skills to peddle sentiment for profit and ran a lot of charities, for there were still the Donoghues and other riffraff like the Donoghues, a grim and dreary lot. The town that Jan had built from scratch out of the good, warm Kansas earth was being overrun with them.

What did they want? More. More. Still more.

The bootstrap argument was still as sound as ever, but Archie was so busy gospeling he did not even realize his shift from right to left, from black to red, from industry to mooching. His churchly argument was this: "A Christian has a duty to spread a little cheer."

He did that with the help of governmental grants, still a decided novelty. He often visited the Donoghues and sat and talked with them and came up with solutions.

"More," said the Donoghues, accustomed to the dole.

They were at odds with everyone. Their tempers could never be sweetened. They kept their desires on simmer, always ready to bring them to boil. They wanted the unions to battle for them, but didn't want to work. They were uncouth and dangerous. They lied without worrying why. They stole without worrying where. You had to shake them from your trees because they stole your apples.

Every thievery, suspected or discovered, was blamed on the Donoghue tribe. The constable arrived periodically and hauled them out of hiding to check them out and give them a fair warning. They would start gobbling like a bunch of turkeys who suspected a Thanksgiving dinner. They went to Wichita at every opportunity, a bunch of thieves into a city full of thieves, to huddle with the malcontents. The public health authorities kept checking them for lice. Their windows were all cob-webbed. Their bodies smelled unwashed. The air inside their home was foul. On rare occasions, when they swept, they swept out a mountain of garbage.

The city fathers did their best, the federal government the same, and Archie did the rest. That's where the Christian alter-

native came in. He tried to lend a helping hand materially to tide them over hurdles.

His argument was this: just as you shared your recipes, so, too, in preparation for eternity, you tried to live life in Christ's spirit by sharing overflow. You did not want to spend eternity in hell. Revivals and revivalists were in. The time to start was now.

And overflow it was in Archie's church as robust neighbors gathered to behold another bounteous harvest, while Temperance did tons of dishes in the basement where Abigail was kidding with the deacons. Because of people such as Abigail, now snuggling in the ethnic quilt, modernity was creeping up on everyone in Mennotown and settling in for good.

The tango passed for risky, for example, but dominoes did not. Outlandish hats were still an iffy item, but rhinestone watches were allowed; Archie wore one himself.

An East Coast student ate a goldfish, and that became a fad.

A university worked out a plan to reach the moon: some people thought that interesting.

*Gone with the Wind* premiered in Atlanta. Carole Lombard and Clark Gable fell in love. Frank Sinatra wore bell-bottomed trousers. The old-timers were horrified: What would be next? A sleeveless bathing suit? A beehive for a hairdo? A bathroom separating gender?

"False rumps?" shrieked Archibald. "The origins of species?"

The preachers preached; the volunteers became inspired. The Donoghues danced to the thumps of polka music as if there be no tomorrow.

A few meek voices, here and there, spoke up among the masses and tried to stem the tide.

They pointed out: no matter what a Christian did to counteract modernity, the Donoghues were still the same. They were still "elements", prefixed by "undesirable." Their children couldn't read. Their parents didn't work. Their back yards, full of leaves left over from last year. The public schools made for a mighty melting pot, but even so, love for the rabble-rousers could

surely be carried too far.

Why throw good money after bad? That was the question mark.

Now that the New Deal Democrats were nesting in the White House and spreading tentacles like mad, there were rumors of ruinous taxation.

# Chapter 91

The papers sold the Roosevelt couple as the solution to all ills. His hobby was Freemasonry; she favored the downtrodden. Most Midwest farmers saw in their new President the best the country could bring forth—a man with freckles on his fingers and hot dogs his favorite food.

One of his strategies was bigger government. As far as Mennotowners were concerned, here was a man who walked the modern walk and talked the modern talk; he had his country's interests at heart; he strove for wholesale betterment, a real down-to-earther.

To open up world markets for what the farmers grew was only one of Roosevelt's solutions. A New World Order was his aim, the papers talked a lot about a global village, so to speak, where friend and foe palavered democratically and listened to each other.

Two World Fairs proved that position firmly, one in the east, one in the west. The papers had nothing but praise: he had done everything he promised he would do in his election pledge: to lock the New Deal firmly into neat, square, bureaucratic slots.

The man was as good as his word. The country had nicely recovered. The burdens had fallen away. The frightening wobble was past.

"All wars are obsolete!" cried Mrs. Roosevelt as well, while standing on a platform and pounding with her gavel—the perfect suffragette, as Josie pointed out—prevailing on goodwill by a decided, paramount concern: just how to keep America the Beautiful out of the European brawl.

Some jokester pollsters took a survey: It was first Roosevelt, then God.

The bankers were printing up money like mad. The poorest lad could once again afford to buy a bicycle by buying in installments.

Most folks felt gratified. Democracy prevailed!

You viewed a troubling issue carefully from every single angle and then chose majority rule. The globe turned once more clockwise on its axis. Josie could purchase whatever she wished—she treated herself to a poodle and showed off her pedigree papers.

While overseas, on the decrepit continent, a madman was rallying troops, if you believed the *New York Times* which, by then, many people read, this being a progressive generation generally, in Mennotown there was still continuity and certainty.

Tradition had triumphed. Relief was palpable. The Lord's Prayer—as ringing as ever!

The louder the worshippers sang, the better it was for their lungs. You had to behave in a Christian manner and show your respect for your neighbors by placing the good of the town before personal gain. Community togetherness was in. Radical views were still out. Little Melly was stuffing herself harder than ever. She parted her hair in the middle.

The Depression had taught all a lesson; they voted a moderate Congress. They still knew in a visceral, yet somewhat murky way that if you let yourself be swayed by liberals, who hollered of equality and spendthrift union benefits, the result was like let-

ting fly out of a paper bag a flock of restive doves. You could predict precisely what would happen to the windshield of your flivver!

But still, there now was tolerance for modern ways that had not existed before. A grant or two did wonders for a farmer. There was a middle road. You kept yourself smack in the center.

Not even Josie roused herself sufficiently to champion the left—a stance which, in the olden days, had caused such discontent. Advancing age had tamed her spirit nicely. Her hair was white. Her mood was mellow and serene. She lived among the pacifists, and she felt peaceful now, her eye on Rarey's artistry, content with compromise, albeit somewhat sluggish.

It seemed that nearly all of Europe was at war. A Jew wrote a song for an overweight girl. America was pleased. Her voice poured from the loudspeakers the bureaucrats had nested in trees:

*"God Bless America. Land that I love,*
*Stand beside her*
*And guide her*
*Through the night*
*with a light*
*from above."*

"We'll never get involved!" the President declared. "If Europe wants a squabble, it won't be our problem."

The folks of Mennotown felt cheered and reassured, now that it was once more peace, plenty and prosperity in Heaven and on earth. What with their memories of ethnic hate still raw, nobody wanted war, and certainly not Josephine, with Rarey now of draft age.

"So let them kill each other off," she said, and spoke for all.

Josie was the only one who tried to read *Mein Kampf,* but it disgusted her so much that she—who loved to read and read just about anything—just never finished it.

The hard hand of dictatorship was something that she understood from bitter past experience. But now that she herself no longer had her pretty fingertips in matters crassly liberal, she rel-

ished someone else's bullet searching for its mark.

Thus, Josie had no difficulty whatsoever in seeing the sharp demarcation lines that separated good from bad. As far as Josie was concerned, the Führer was a villain made to order.

Before the Führer's war crashed into Mennotown by way of draft board postcards, life in this German settlement in the Midwest was as just as close to bliss as Heaven will grant earth.

Everything had slowed down to a crawl in the Depression, but now, once more, the economy was moving and improving. In fact, it zipped along. The harvests were richer than ever.

Glen Miller sang his "Chattanooga Choo-choo," and people tapped their feet.

"Walking the Floor" was a very big hit.

"Onward, Christian Soldiers," was Archie's favorite song.

If you compared the past with today, tomorrow, next year, you knew that the Lord held the rudder. Belief in Him was limitless. The granaries bulged with His kernels. The birds were full of song.

If you had two good eyes to see—which Archibald did not, due to the ethnic assault!—and take in bounty heaped on bounty, you saw in Mennotown again the signs that spoke of German cleanliness, obedience, diligence, and order. It would not stay that way, the Mennotowners knew, unless they wrapped themselves in their unrivaled ethnic net—but in the meantime, why not be more generous with birds of different colors and thoughts of different stripe?

Life, once again, was good—warm, full of light and harvest sounds and orchard fragrances, and it was widely understood and fervently believed that even greater boom times lay ahead. The dreaded dole was now a memory for all except the Donoghues—a bunch of hoodlums menacing the neighborhood as ever, to a man on the treacherous road.

Take Abigail.

Here was a a hussy and a flirt—and never mind that she was wed to Doctorjay, still as agog as ever. She had been born a

Donoghue and would remain a Donoghue, no matter the veneer. She was extravagant. She dressed so gaudily that sometimes travelers mistook her for the mayor's wife, which caused a lot of guffaws. She even cut a heart into the exit of her outhouse, which was a definite affront. The locals liked to speculate that it might be the water, or else, maybe her blood.

In summary, when war broke out on the old continent, the folks in Mennotown did not give one small hoot. They had their hands full with their own affairs, now that normality was back.

One such affair was Archibald, more in the public eye than ever.

Temperance was sitting on the edge of Little Melly's leather covered walnut sofa, stirring sugar in her coffee. She said to Little Melly: "I have a high opinion of myself. I see myself as a suitable spouse."

Little Melly couldn't stop trembling. A cold, no doubt, was blossoming. "Of course you are. Nobody says you aren't."

"Your nephew," offered Temperance, wielding a needle with which she kept stabbing the air, "is someone over whom one must keep silent vigil. Is it true that he went to a fiddler's convention?"

Hot shame swept into Little Melly's face. "Why do you say that, Temperance? To spite me? Is that it?"

Relentless, that was Temperance. "If you don't mind my saying so, his notions of the fairer sex are strange, to say the very least. It's all your fault. You spoiled him, Little Melly."

Little Melly looked as sour as a bushel of crab apples. "I did my best, and now it's my fault? Well, if you say so, who am I to argue? I guess I kept him in his diapers past the point where it was all too easy to—well, never mind. Just never mind! I guess you're right. I guess I spoiled him rotten."

"If you don't mind my saying so. You must have, Little Melly."

"I guess I must have. Sadly."

Little Melly knew that Temperance had a point. Her Archie

was the last son in her brother's family of ten—each one of them two-syllables, except for Archibald. She'd nicknamed him. She shouldn't have. And here was the result.

"When he was still a toddler, I used to dress him up in skirts. He looked so cute and cuddly. I loved him more than most. I had such hopes for him." Little Melly took a deep and trembling breath and added bravely: "But he is sturdy in the Lord. Last week, he saved five souls."

Temperance was playing with the fringes of the tablecloth, involved in deep thoughts of her own. "Regardless. He looks sissified. If you want my opinion."

The spinster wheeled around to stare at Temperance. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Does he still have that problem with his bladder?" Now Temperance was on a roll. She launched herself full force. "Somebody has to speak his mind. He's sissified. He cannot seize a set of oxen by the horns or yet a rooster by his flaps—how can he bring himself to take the plunge? That's what I want to know. If you want my opinion."

"Why not give it a try?"

"You know that I'm willing. I'm willing to give it a whirl."

On Wednesdays, Archie needed volunteers, and females were his favorites; they licked his postage stamps. They were amazingly obedient. With a flick of his wrist they arose with a hymn. Another flick, and they fell back onto their fleshy backsides, as though they were a row of dominoes. He never tired watching. He reveled in his power. He had a way with words that made the nickels rain. He had his kingdom pat.

Yet all the while, his aunt kept a shrewd eye on him, and with just cause, for all around him, people married, settled down, sowed, reaped, and multiplied, obeying ties of blood and friendship, and Archie had the opportunity. But, sadly, no desire.

She was at her wits' end. She had done all she could, had brought him up as best as she knew how; the least that he could do to thank her for her pains would be to grow a proper mustache.

Not even that. Alas. Now he was sucking on a cuticle. "You just don't understand."

Ah, but she did. She did. Since matrimonial love had passed her by, she lived for him and through him. What had it netted her? A balding bachelor. A drearier fate for any man was hard to contemplate.

"What are you waiting for? The day will come when I'll be too old to darn your Sunday socks. Then what?"

"I am the way I am. Don't blame yourself. It's not your fault."

"Why should I blame myself? I did the best I could. I looked after you like a baby."

It was exasperating. She did not understand how life could go so wrong, when she had never spared herself dispensing good advice. But now her energy had run its course; she longed for him to usher in the Kingdom proper, as his father had done, and before him his father and his father's father, all resting somberly beneath their mildewed stones, this after having multiplied themselves.

"Look. All I'm pointing out to you is that a preacher needs a wife. That's all. Is that too much to ask?"

A frozen silence was her answer. He sat with empty eyes.

She pulled her chair up closer and put a blanket carefully across his knees; the fringes hung on either side and made a pretty pattern. "Well, then? What is your answer, Archie?"

"Enough. I said enough."

Tears stung her eyes. He was her cross to bear. The modern doctors talked of opening him up to see what might be wrong inside.

"If you would only give yourself a push and marry Temperance, all the rest will slide into place."

Each day, one argument led to the next until both he and Little Melly were on their feet, she shouting: "I'm only pointing out—" and Archie shouting back: "—you nag me half to death!"

"She simply squeaks with cleanliness," she said to Archibald,

enumerating one last time the merits of the girl named Temperance.

He lowered himself into her cushions. "Speak up. Let's get it over with."

She studied him obliquely. In the pit of her heart sat a thought.

No matter what he did, how cleverly he argued back, she could not shake that thought. Something hung over Archie like a bat, well-hidden from the light of day. Her notions about what it really was were rather dim—such things made her dizzy and daffy.

"Well. Since you ask. I must admit that I can hardly bear to look at you," she said in a low voice. "You aren't getting any younger."

He pressed his lips together.

She kept circling around him, much like a hen about to lay an egg. She had a one-track mind, and she thought more and more of Temperance as Archie's last salvation.

"Don't tell me you prefer your theories to anybody else's. Why not make use of Temperance? A holiday is coming up. A picnic, Archie dear? Just you and she. Alone."

"I've got to run," ducked Archibald, who heard the front gate squeak. The moment he spied Temperance, herself already on the cusp of middle age, the good life showing in both hips and waist, Archie was diving for cover. Archie was showing no signs of surrender. Archie was slipping away.

Little Melly rushed after her nephew, determined. "Now? Where to, Archie? What's the rush?"

"To find out what the Methodists are going to do next."

Temperance, too, chased after Archibald. "Look, that can wait. The Methodists can wait. Sit down and pay attention to your female visitor."

"Be courteous to Temperance!"

"She has a coarse skin and a squint."

He yelled that loud enough for Temperance to hear. He could be cruel beyond belief; he was impossible. He was well past the age where putting leeches on both nostrils might have clicked problems into place.

For Little Melly, this spelled trouble—trouble with a "T" writ large. She felt a thick sense of impending disaster. She sensed the subtle signs. They made her mouth go dry. There were too many telling clues. Neighbors gave one another knowing winks. A single fly could rob him of his sleep. On bath nights, he fussed about towels. A tea glass burned his fingertips. If he could spare an extra quarter, he spent it on an ice cream cone. And there he stood. And licked.

"It's now or never, girl," she therefore prodded Temperance, who, by that time, had visited a lot in Little Melly's kitchen for an entire year. No way that Archie could ignore her.

"No way," she'd said to Archibald on more than one occasion, "will I yield on a balmy night what I could parlay into marriage."

To which he only shrugged.

She was the kind, she'd amplified, who guarded her virginity. She'd even added soulfully: "Though I have often wondered, Archibald: what might it feel like, to kiss you on your schmoozer? At any rate, be brave enough to try."

He blushed like a maiden at the thought, while making awkward conversation.

"Not all girls bite," she nudged him on. "But outright bashful, aren't you? Archie? What is the matter, Archie? Considering? If you want my opinion?"

The response was a sinister hush.

# Chapter 92

The Führer laid his blueprint on the table as he explained how Germany would set its boundaries and fight, defending them.

"This war," the Führer said, "is over *Lebensraum.*"

A roar went up wherever he appeared, for destiny was in the works; the war dance had begun.

When Germany declared that it would slay the Antichrist, a young man trained to give his all in furtherance of a doctrine that did not tolerate the smallest question mark on manhood and virility, put both hands around his trembling heart and handed it to his beloved Führer: "My life is yours. I trust you as my God." He turned his head and faced the hated visage: "Well, Israel and Sarah. It's either you or me."

It was, for Jonathan, the simplest of equations: if enough sacrificed in blood, then Germany would win. All loyalties were firmly locked in place. All wheels were rolling merrily for victory, and all of them rolled east.

Some might be called to sacrifice, but many thousands more were waiting to be born. That was the price, the harvest, and the glory.

Some had to die, becoming plunging comets on behalf of Germany, for causes clearly understood, for reasons forcefully explained. But many, many more would live a better, healthier life—free from the fear of Communist enslavement. It was a fair exchange.

The Führer's panzers started gobbling up the miles that led to Apanlee on a slow day with gently falling rain. It was a day like any other day, sweet and a bit nostalgic, with the smell of scented raindrops falling slowly on mellowing clover. The rain cleansed the streets, washed the shame of Versailles into the gutters. The sky was glowing with the light of hope and trust and certainty. The youth squads marched in firm formation. Before the day was gone, the sun came briefly out again, then set, and everything turned tranquil and serene.

Before he left to finish off the Antichrist, Jonathan bought a puppy and gave it to Lilo. It was a small and pudgy thing, a ball of fur, with cheeks that made it look like a chipmunk. She named it Winston Churchill.

She said to Jonathan: "While you are gone, me and my dog, we'll have a bully time," and Heidi corrected her grammar.

Lilo said to Jonathan but did not look at him: "You will come back. Won't you?"

"He better," Heidi said.

He answered both of them obliquely. "We're locked in mortal struggle."

"Be careful, Jonathan. Don't waste all the effort I lavished on you!"

Love swelled his heart. "Don't talk like that. It's a sure way to give yourself a headache."

He knew: ahead lay days and weeks that would add up to much more than merely a kindergarten war. He knew the war could end up hurting Heidi, who had three draft-age sons, but war was a necessity, and after all was said and done, the stars would return to their orbits.

He longed to tell her that. He wanted to say more. He saw

that she was vulnerable.

"And you," he said, his mind careening now, "stay inside. Hear? Obey alarms. Don't take unnecessary chances. We'll break the traitors' necks."

"I know."

"The enemy has airplanes made of spit. The enemy has only wooden guns."

"Be sure to keep your powder dry," said Lilo, too. He saw that a small shadow had settled in her eyes.

He stroked her hair. "The new millennium is on the march. That's what it's all about. You be a good girl, Lilo. You be good to your mother. You take good care of her."

"I will."

She, too, believed, as Heidi did, as everybody did, in Providence and Destiny, two words on everybody's lips.

"We will not lose. We have a cause," said Lilo.

"That's right."

"You give your all, and more besides, for a cause that is greater than yourself."

"Exactly."

When Jonathan remembered Apanlee, green spots danced in his eyes. His marching map was tucked into his belt; his gray eyes glistened brightly. He itched for manly combat.

Endearments were rare with the reticent race, but now a miracle occurred, for Heidi took his hands and put them deep into her pockets, as she had done when first she found him in the streets. She smiled at him through tears. "You are my dearest hope."

He freed himself. Fine tremors ran along his back as though he'd just made love. He took a map and found a pen and drew a big, fat line from Heidi's kitchen table straight to Apanlee. He drew it with red ink.

Those were seductive days. The Führer roused torrents of feeling.

Say *Lebensraum* and see the world grow still with awe. Hear marching boots strike sparks on cobble stones and know it meant

land for the righteous and strong, defeat for the cruel, the false, the unworthy. The Wehrmacht fanned its forces. The panzers started chewing up the roads, their turrets pointing east to face the enemy.

The farmers, weary from a good day's work, sipped beer and listened to the Führer: this kind of war was moral duty and God's will. And if a bullet came—and bullets flew in war!—why, then a well-earned medal would catch it and deflect it.

Young couples stood in line to get married.

A lone old man raked leaves in the Victory Park and wept with sentiment.

Across the street, a grandmother unraveled her favorite sweaters to knit another pair of mittens to give to the Red Cross. The preachers threw their prayers in for free.

Huge swastikas flowed down across the fronts of public buildings. Boys slung their guns across their shoulders and dangled grenades from their belts to underline their bravery. Girl teenagers, impetuous to taste romance, played fast and giggly games.

Every newsstand blossomed headlines about the coming victory. This was no time for selfish doubt. The enemy would throw his broomsticks down and run for cover in the bushes. The enemy would dig his trenches with his helmet; he didn't even have sufficient spades. The enemy, in point of fact, had yet to learn to shoot!

No one tolerated pacifists, and Heidi didn't either, but nonetheless she told her sons:

"War is no picnic, boys. Be sure to bundle up." Her oldest son was twenty-four years old, the second two years younger, the last one just eighteen, when orders came: "Enlist."

"You are young Germany," she told her sons, since she was conscious of her script, and dutiful, and the occasion called for slogans.

Their draft notices crisp in their pockets, they made cheerful bets with each other, while peering eastwards through their binoculars.

"We'll cut a swath, smash through the weeds!"

"We'll catch us a coward to put in a cage."

"We'll fetch us a Commie for breakfast."

And there as here, and then as now: their soldiers were all brave beyond belief; the enemy was cowardly; his guns were laughable; where would he hide? Why, in a chicken house!

Heidi watched while they bantered like puppies. That day, she saw the landscape as they did, with their young, shining eyes. Ahead lay one impatient rush to victory. This war would not last long. The Wehrmacht would win with bewildering speed. Two months of good weather would do it.

Faith calmed her heart with feathered strokes.

The weight of ritual and metal did the rest.

She said, while roping up three bedrolls: "When you return, a roast pig will be waiting—" She would spice it with apples and mushrooms. She told herself while forcing down her panic: "A soldier follows orders." She stood trembling before them and tried not to cry. Before she could blink, they were gone.

Soon, she would walk in mourning, but that was yet to come.

For Jonathan, it was a wondrous time. The panzers started chewing up the roads that led to Apanlee.

The more he marched, the more his chosen homeland grew. With every step he took, he reclaimed Apanlee. The streets were thick with *Landsers;* he joined them willingly. Nobody had ordered him into war; with open eyes he'd joined, proudly opting for the Führer's colors, asking not what other choice there was.

All songs affirmed it clearly:

*"—traitors and Jews reaped every reward,*
*reparations into the millions—"*

His heart aflame with certainty, he wore the Mystic Cross as his much-treasured badge of honor. With life and limb he backed it.

He moved with the sun, and the sun moved with him; a wheel of gold that never paled; it was as if it didn't want to miss the spectacle. Its rays would catch the Führer's airplanes' wings and

make them glitter merrily. The clouds were flashing steel. The air was trembling with the hum of aircraft, all flying straight into the sun that gave the earth its energy so that the wheat could grow.

That's how. That's why. That's when the Führer flung himself against the Antichrist holed up inside the Kremlin.

The Führer took of Poland what he wished. He flew as the eagle that hastens to eat.

He came in a flurry of dust, with the smell of burnt rubber and fuel. The Führer cried with passion in his heart: "I want the Free City of Danzig!" and bombs started falling like beans.

His Wehrmacht caught the world off-guard—just piles of smoking rubble! A pig burst into shrieks. A squad burst into laughter.

The Mystic Cross, infectuous! The Führer's panzers, awesome!

Propelled on by the roar of well-oiled cannons, shells tore open the treacherous borders, laid bare for the Wehrmacht the enemies' cities and towns.

Next Norway. That country took less than a month to be conquered.

Denmark resisted no more than a day.

The Netherlands: five days of drifting clouds and ashes, and victory was won.

The multitudes were jubilant. A child ran to open the gates.

The Messerschmitts controlled the skies. The panzers seized more bridgeheads.

"Hands up!" the victors shouted, and the defeated enemy did speedily as he was told, while brick and mortar flew.

The Mystic Cross moved east and ever deeper east, merely met with volleys of roses, and peasants offered salt and bread. A master stroke, this sudden war, that brought into the ethnic fold the many loyal Germans who had lived in ethnic isolation deep in the hills of Transylvania for seven centuries. One flag! One language! they shouted.

Huge, happy crowds surged all around the field-gray *Landsers* who told the mulling throngs that, even though the war had only just begun, peace was already on the way.

Think *Lebensraum*—and feel the universe expand. Shout *Lebensraum*—and watch the fires leap.

From the icy North Pole to the boiling hot equator, from Spain east to the Caucasus, the world lay on its knees.

Bulgaria.

Romania.

North Africa.

Soon, Britain battled for her life while thousands of the Führer's shells lit up the sky like summer lightning. The *Landsers* barely paused to sleep, and only in one town, perhaps, to ask direction for the next. Songs streamed from open windows.

There was no force on earth, it seemed, to stop the Mystic Cross.

From whence had come such strength? Out of the violated womb of Germany! Out of a robber peace that had marauded Europe and had enriched the bankers!

The slogans never stopped. The man who crafted them had not appeared from nowhere, nor fabricated sentiments that strong, out of some spider webs. He sprang straight from an angry people's loins, and they replied a thousand-fold as though two words contained their wrath:

*"Sieg Heil!"*

*"Sieg Heil!"*

*"Sieg Heil!"*

No army had ever moved faster.

For Jonathan, it started on the whitest of white nights, the shortest night of the year—that drive for Apanlee.

The watchword: *Barbarossa*!

And Jonathan was there—the luckiest man alive. He plunged the Mystic Cross into the body of the Antichrist as though he sank a sharp harpoon into the body of whale. He sat atop a pan-

zer that ate through sand and mud. Before him were more panzers; behind him came more panzers, and still more, and yet more. They ate through grassy plains, and even geese and chickens ran for cover. Avenging monsters, all, they moved over ditches, across rivers, through forests and meadows, striking east and ever deeper east, tearing open the treacherous borders, laying bare every city and town.

The Baltic countries, now liberated from the Red Terror—one by one! It took your breath away.

Still forward, on to Moscow—into the land of unrelieved calamity, already waiting for the man whose name shone in the eyes of youth, whose voice spoke with the thunder of a god, who cut a swath of righteousness across the treacheries of nations.

From blue horizon to horizon, the Führer's pilots dove with clockwork precision, and when they rose again—why, battle ships were sinking and armies routed in retreat, above them drifting clouds of ashes!

It's true that they came as avengers. They did what avengers must do. They made the puppets of the foe fly high into the air, then fall into the river, drowning.

Soon, hundreds of thousands of enemies dead, and hundreds of thousands arrested! This was determined war; there was the enemy; if you were young and full of wrath and had your marching orders, you learned to shoot your foes. The Führer shouted until he lost his voice that anybody treacherous deserved that kind of fate, and to a voice, the multitudes replied: "So help us God! So help us God!" He was scooping up willing disciples like grain.

Whole cities were burning, end to end, as though they were mere hornets' nests, as the assault of righteous wrath rolled over field and meadow and smoked out traitors everywhere with cannon shells and rifle blasts. Just dust and flying hoofs!

The upper Dnieper region.

Fierce fire flew from every blazing barrel. Enemy bridgeheads collapsed amid thunder and lightning and smoke.

The Führer traced his battles with a trembling index finger and tallied up his victories. He and his generals had many animated arguments.

Grodno next—a heap of smoking embers.

A few days later, Dunaburg.

A liberated Riga.

Belorussia.

Beresina.

This here, a so-called worker's paradise? And not one chair in an entire village?

A gray land, gray on gray, that's what the Wehrmacht found—a land of famished dogs and homeless cats and trembling, weeping peasants who knelt to welcome them.

This, too, is part of history not taught in any school. The Russians welcomed them. They told the field-gray troops, tears streaming down their ashen faces: "Heaven sent you! Heaven sent you! You say that you bring peace? You say that you bring order? Why, here is bread and salt!"

The earth rose up in fountains. Flame throwers flared, deep in the Finnish forests. Destroyers spewed out shells across the icy sea.

Smolensk. Next, Minsk.

Avenging forces entered Minsk and pushed the Lenin statue from its base. There lay the symbol of the Bolsheviks and Jews—chipped nose, cracked chin, and broken ears!

By early fall, that year, the Führer's *Landsers* front stretched from the White Sea to the Black Sea—and, at the stroke of noon, one day, late in September, a field-gray *Landser* by the name of Jonathan put his hard soldier's heel upon the blood-soaked acres where, once upon a fabled time, Peet Neufeld's priceless winter wheat had grown.

# Chapter 93

The steppe lay ablaze with heat. The *Landser* rode astride a motorcycle, taking corners at high speed. He stopped by the acacia alley.

The street lay eerily empty. The buildings looked deserted. The ground was littered with debris. A fence was leaning sideways. A door lay broken on the porch.

He sat there for ten minutes, his profile sharp and chiseled, staring. Small beads of perspiration collected on his upper lip. He felt as if he were a tumbleweed. His throat was dry; he couldn't swallow; the hot wind drove him on. He knew: "A tidal force is building."

He hadn't known what to expect—but not this emptiness, this eerie, ghostly silence. The air was saturated with the scents of a departing summer—and not a living soul!

He walked toward the entrance. He lit a cigarette with shaking fingers. The ash grew long at the tip; he walked like a tiger; it didn't fall off.

"As though it happened yesterday," he told the empty building.

The gate hung loose in its hinges. He pushed it open with his foot. A shaggy dog rose from the bushes, growling.

The *Landser* licked his lips. "Good boy! Good boy! Come here." The dog began to wag his tail. From out of the corner of his eye he saw a shadow move. It startled him; he held his rifle at the ready. "Anybody—anybody home?"

A peasant, an old Baba, shrank back into the hall. Her face had the texture of bark.

"Hey! You! Don't move!" He took a quick step forward. He aimed his gun to show that he meant business. She counted on her wrinkles. She grabbed the barrel with both hands and tried to push it down.

"Don't! I said don't move!"

She started shrieking loudly, her hair in unkempt strands. "You! Go away! I said scat! Hooligan!"

"Stand still," he ordered sharply, backing her into a corner. "If you don't give me any trouble, no harm will come to you." He spoke to her as though she were a nervous animal that needed to be soothed. "Look here! Don't be afraid. I want to talk to you—"

She stared at him while shivering with fear. "I stand blameless. My pantry is empty—"

She knew she was lying; she still had that rooster. She was willing to fight for that rooster to the death. "There's nothing here to take, I swear," she whined with expertise. "I swear. I swear. All food is gone. All of it. All! All gone! Why don't you go away?"

"Don't you—"

"There's not enough to fill a hollow tooth!"

She spoke a broken German. She dared him, chin to chin. She saw that she was winning slowly; he seemed uncertain and conflicted; she knew in a triumphant flash she had the upper hand. She threw herself against the door and pushed both hands against his chest: "I said leave me alone—!" She tried to block him with her broom.

He stared into her face as though she were an apparition. He

reached for her to touch her shoulder. "Look here. This is my home. I have come back—"

There was a pause. The woman started pulling at her skirt with gnarled and trembling fingers. "It's you?"

He swallowed hard: "Natasha? Baba?"

Her face broke into many folds. She went limp with relief and abandon. Her wooden knees gave way. On faltering legs, she moved forward.

"It's Jonny? Is it you?

"It's Baba? Are you Baba?"

The agony of decades burst within them both, a bladder. Both spoke as though they had one voice. "Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. It's me."

He pulled her up and clasped her hard against epaulets. A storm within threatened to uproot him. He shook and couldn't stop. She put her trembling arms around his neck and hung on for dear life. "It's you! My God, it's you!"

A tear emerged from the corner of her eye. She saw he, too, was fighting back his tears. She started weeping noisily. *"Bozhe moi!* Who swaddled you? Who tickled you? Who put you on the potty? Oh, how I pined for you!"

"Natasha. Tell. Is anyone alive?"

"A day too late," she wept. "Too late! Too late!"

"What do you mean? Why do you say, 'too late'?"

"Three were still left. Two women and a little girl. That's all. Why did you hesitate? They're gone."

"Gone where?"

"It rained hard blows from clubs and butt ends of a hundred rifles. The trains came and took them away. Oh, Jonny! Honey child! Why didn't you come yesterday? The trains! They came and sucked the life from all the villages. The German villages are gone!"

She ran to serve him something for his stomach. She made the kettle sing. She inspected him from every single angle. Such joy! Such joy! This was a holiday; a lost son had come home.

"Let's get those boots off your tired feet! I'll watch you eat until you burst. You must be starving! Why are you still so skinny?"

Let all the feathers fly!

She armed herself with a long stick to run the rooster down so she could proudly serve the bird in her chipped, dented bowl, the one that Hein had given her, the one with yellow flowers, to Jonathan for supper.

He could not hear her questions above the roaring of his blood. She watched him walk, with boots that shook the brittle floors of Apanlee, from room to room, as far as she could tell, the sole male left of the once-far-flung creed.

"—remember your neighbors, the Penners? Of seven strong children, not one survived."

"—remember your Petersburg uncle? *Ach!* Shot in the back by a guard."

"—remember the Dycks, the Fröses, the Siemens? All gone. All dead. All killed. Their names recorded nowhere—"

He listened without words while something hard solidified within his chest, a boulder: All smashed against the rock of history! He listened, and his teaspoon rattled in his cup.

"Oh, Jonny! Honey child. While you were gone, vile things have happened here. The execution pits filled up—"

He stepped to the window and took in his surroundings. "Stone by stone, and brick by brick," he told the Russian servant, "I shall reclaim what's mine."

Her old face crumpled from the warmth of genuine emotion. "Those who dwell under His shadow," she said in a voice that held worship and awe, "shall return."

"That's right!"

She had practiced her German; she knew the Good Word. "They shall be revived like grain, and grow like the vine," She was proud of the words she remembered. She said with a small sigh. "Their scent shall be like wine of Lebanon."

When she finished, she heard no applause. He said without looking at her: "Who was responsible?"

Her old heart all but stopped. "Whatever do you mean? Why

do you bother me with such a silly question?"

"A name. That's all I need. A name."

She backed off then. She squinted at him carefully, while she chewed on her lip. Her chin dropped to her chest. "What do I know? I never paid attention."

"Tell me, Natasha. Now. I need to know. This minute."

She buried her face in the palms of her hands to hide her conflicting emotions, but even as she did so, she peered at him through slits between old, careworn fingers. She swallowed a hard sob. "Leave me alone. What do I know?" Did he remember Dominik, who, even as a child, had been a main source of bedevilment at Apanlee? "Don't blame your Baba, Jonny. I'm just a worthless peasant, not worth a grain of salt."

He studied her in silence. Little was left of the once-husky, once-pretty peasant. Her spine was bent; she had no teeth; her knees were old and rickety, but even so, she told him now, her words tumbling over each other: "I served them to the end. Just you remember that." She started fussing over him. She started petting him and pinching him while he slumped by the window. She saw that he was numb with shock. "The last time I saw you, you were so small your feet didn't even touch the floor. And look at you today!"

"It is ironic, isn't it?" he finally said in a wooden voice. "I barely know their names."

"Of course you do! You still remember them—how could you have forgotten! Your aunt Marleen? Her daughter Mimi? Remember her? Your little cousin, thrice removed? She had a little girl child, Erika. These three were left. Right to the end. I served them well. Ask anyone. They're gone. I served them well. I served them to the end."

"Of course you did."

"I did. I did. But now they're gone. All three are gone. They're gone!"

His scar began itching like mad. "Yes, I remember Mimi—"

"You see? Why should you not remember Mimi? She was our go-between. She had a child, born of the blackest times. Her

name was Erika—and what a gifted child! All eyes and thoughts. All question marks. She, too, is gone. They're gone! All of your people, gone! Shouts, blows and kicks rained down on them. The purges took them all! The black night swallowed them!"

He listened to the ghoulish litany. His cousins. Gone. His uncles, gone. His nieces, aunts and nephews. Gone.

"They always came at night—"

Pulled out of bed. Dragged off in chains. Clubbed into cattle cars.

"—no one spared. No one. None in the entire neighborhood. Last week, the trains arrived and started sucking up the German villages—"

He trembled with wrath and revenge. He asked again: "Who was responsible?"

She managed to dispatch a wintry smile but it died on the spot. "Why not leave well enough alone? The ruffians, too, are gone. They all packed up and ran." Her mind spun frantically. Where was her no-good son? Was he hiding behind the sugar beet sacks? She took a sucking breath and started wooing Jonathan: "Have you returned to dazzle Apanlee?" She brushed away a tear. It dried on the back of her hand.

"Natasha. Now!"

"What do I know? Don't torment me. So many people, guilty. Why blame a single one?" Her son! Hein's son! Though never in the album, sadly. She overcame a stammer and tried diverting him. "Your homestead is still here. Why not take a good look?"

He drew a line; that was his job. "A name. That's all I need."

Her mind raced like a cornered animal, in circles. He had come for her son. A liar son, but still. Might Dominik be hiding in the stables? Had he crouched down behind the chicken coop?

Now she was audibly gasping. "Why not leave well enough alone? You have returned. You're back! How you resemble Uncle Benny." She kept on fussing over him, her pulse resounding in her throat. She wrung her hands. She blew her nose. She made a lot of noise. "When you were small, you used to curl up

like a puppy in my lap—"

"I want an answer. Now."

She calculated desperately. She knew that Dominik and Shura both had protectors in high places, but could they get there fast enough, now that the panzers had arrived—and chasing them like fire? She saw his eyes were full of memories; he would not hurt her now. She stood, at any rate, by then, thanks to the juicy rooster she would serve him in her own yellow dish, once more at the periphery.

She saw he would not be appeased. So violently shaken was he by emotions that he wouldn't look her in the eye. She had her instincts at the ready, but even so, she could not help herself; she kept on chattering, like mad. "Your family? A trap door swallowed them; who is to say who sprang it? There was so much confusion. The world was upside down. They came and took the last. At bayonet point. It was a scary sight. Nobody could do anything. Oh, Jonny! Your family's been swept away!"

He said to her: "We'll make the mountains tremble with our rage."

She nodded, knowing that the dice were cast. What could she tell the executioner? He was the tool of fate. He had his finger on the trigger. He rocked from heel to heel.

"Yet one more time, and no excuses, Baba. Who was responsible? This was my land. This was my home. My forebears paid for it in work and sweat and blood—"

"It's yours," she told him eagerly. "No one ever argued."

"We'll clean the mess. That's why we've come. But once the cleaning up is done, we'll grow wheat here again. Leave things to me—"

At that, her heart leaped like a grasshopper; indeed, it positively soared. Leave things to me! That's what Hein used to say to her when life seemed overwhelming. "Of course you will! Of course!" She didn't know if she should laugh or cry, if she should stay or flee. Here was a young man of magnetic power, a zealot of the Faith and spirit. She knew him as she knew herself. She saw herself reflected, old and dry and doubled up with overwork,

in his large, shiny buttons, and muttered, to make sure:

"Just you remember this: I served you well. I always did. I always will. When you were born, I held you on a pillow. When you were teething, I sang you lullabies. You were my special pet."

"I know."

She started circling him. "You're different. You've changed. Your eyes have the color of ice. As Uncle Benny always said—" She stopped to search her memory to find a fitting phrase that would soften the rage that she saw in his face but all sayings had flown from her mind. She stuttered mindlessly: "You do remember Uncle Benny? Don't you? You must. You must remember him."

"Not really, no. He was my father, was he not?"

"Your father? No, you silly goose. He was your grandfather." She attempted a pitiful smile. "He lived inside himself. His business was thinking and dreaming."

"They killed him, too?"

She prattled on. She was beside herself, completely overwrought.

"It was a grisly night. That's when I saw you last. I looked and looked for you. I looked for your bones in the ashes—"

He was like the moon; if he rolled, so did she; if he stopped, so did she. "Here. Take a look. I guarded all I could. It's all yours. Yours. The books. The samovar. The quill holder. The salt shaker. Hein's wooden pipe, preserved. Do you remember Hein? I do. I see him still. He was the heart of every summer party." She swallowed, adding bravely: "He might have had his faults, but he was good to me. He gave me a wagon, a horse, a cow and a goat. Ah! Those were my happiness years—"

What loomed before him was the Question. He took her by the shoulders and shook her like a doll.

"Who was responsible for so much suffering, Natasha? Tell me. I need to know. I really need to know."

Fine tremors in the corners of her mouth, Natasha told him without blinking: "You ask an old donkey like me?"

"This minute, I must know."

She licked her lips. She muttered vaguely: "Nobody knew which way was up or down—" With her good knee, she pushed open the door to the study. "Come take a look. Here! Uncle Benny's place. See that big desk? That's where he sat. That's where he did his thinking. I always kept it neat and polished—"

"—now marred with whisky stains!"

"That's where she used to huddle—his little pet, his daffodil. Her name was Dorothy."

"My grandmother? I always thought she was my mother."

"Those two! A love match to the end. They loved each other like turtles." She took him by the elbow. "Look here. Remember this? All this belonged to her. Her weaving loom. Her yarn reel. Her pretty, decorated beaker. How she loved you! How she spoiled you! She used to read to you out loud. From the alphabet book over there—"

"It all comes back to me. Wasn't there a mirror between these two windows?"

"A hoodlum shattered it."

An inner fist took hold of him and started shaking him. "You must tell me. You must! Who was responsible for the atrocities?"

Her tongue was dry. Her lips felt stiff. Who else but Dominik, her no-good son who always shouted—never washed? "Look here. The water pail. The wash bench. The barrels. The copper pots and kettles." She was a beggar now, tears streaming down her face: "Oh, Jonny. Please! Just listen to your Baba. Please just leave well enough alone! I still remember how I dunked you every Saturday. Your soft, clean baby hair. When wet, it curled like crazy—"

He held her on both shoulders. "Natasha, why? What did we ever do that merited such nightmare?"

Her heart beat like a hammer. She felt it in her fingertips. She saw that memories, suppressed for twenty years, were flooding him like tides. She thought of fainting dead away but decided against it; she was trapped like a fly stuck in honey.

"I don't know that," she wailed. "Why do you torment me?" She held her head in her hands, moaning softly. Her tongue had a life of its own. "I never understood it. Never. Nobody understood it. Your people never harmed a soul. They were a blessing for the country. And yet some people must have hated them enough to turn their tombstones upside down. Don't ask me to explain—"

So let him hit her now. She stood all ready for the blow. She even leaned forward and offered her head to his fist. She clenched her jaws and waited.

He didn't hit her, though. Instead, he started talking. It all poured forth from him. His words made little sense to her, but never mind, it was still poetry. She listened to the diphthonged incantation with both ears cocked, her old heart hammering like mad. Oh, how familiar it was! He spoke to her of the long chain of generations she knew so well, the people who had borrowed color for their kernels from the sun. He said, to sum it up:

"Their eyes were on their furrows. They were too good. Too clean. Too innocent. It was not in their nature to recognize the Fiend. They didn't have the killer instinct. That's why the winds swept from the earth their power and their pride." He saw himself again, a little boy, reflected in the glass. "Look at that mirror, Baba. A bandit smashed that mirror with his fists. When that mirror was broken, a little boy died, and a man took his place, for whom mercy is weakness." He told the withered peasant as she stood there, still waiting for the blow: "For the past twenty years, I have lived with hate and slept with hate and dreamed with hate and awakened with hate—for what they did to us. And why? Because we were Germans? We're Germans! I have no other weapon but my hate. The good must hate the evil. That is the mandate now."

At that, she fell upon a chair and sat there like a broody hen, her feathers at an angle. There was no way she could protect her egg, her seed—the misfit she had borne. Still, nature had its way; she would fight on, right to the end, because that was her nature. She had seen people killed before. She had seen little

else for over twenty years. Had she been less endowed with a deep sense of justice, she might have started pleading now, straight from the Holy Book to flatter Jonathan: "You visit the earth and water it; you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water, you provide their grain, for so you have prepared it—" But words deserted her. She stammered one last time: "Some people got confused. There were so many slogans—" Yet all the while she knew. The time for mercy had run out.

He would find Dominik. He would kill Dominik. But not without a struggle.

He said: "We cannot co-exist." A naked savagery was burning in his eyes. He took both of her hands, his own were moist with wrath. "It has a name. It's the Eternal Jew."

She slumped with shock, but then jumped up, gasped once, fell back upon her heels. "You're right! You are exactly right! Bloodsuckers, all! Arch-traitors, all!" The priests had said as much in those forgotten years when icons still were widespread. The priests had pointed out to everyone the race belonged to Satan. The priests were now gone, too. She stammered: "Right you are!" The priests had always pointed out that Hebrews were the only subjects in all of Mother Russia who didn't have clear loyalties; the cats shrank at their touch; they were always berating the tsars. And even Hein, who hardly ever struck a horse, much less a servant or a dog, had nasty things to say about them. She still remembered that.

She blinked at Jonathan, exhaling with relief and disbelief that he would blame the Jews. So let him blame the Jews! She had no stake invested in the Jews. There weren't any left! They, too, had disappeared! Not even Comrade Stalin liked the Jews; whoever liked the Jews? Nobody but nobody!

She filled her lungs with air and said: "If that is true—why, ten fat smallpox on the Jews!" The danger had now passed. Her Dominik was safe, and Jonathan was home. He owned the chariots. She climbed aboard, awaiting further orders.

He stood before her, tall and reassuring, a soldier to his fingertips, a warrior for the Lord, the eagle on his chest just like in

olden times, when tsars were tsars and serfs were serfs, and days were warm and nights were safe, and all was well and snug.

"You're back," she said. "Oh, how I pined for you! You'll work the soil again? What kept you for so long? Why didn't you come yesterday? Your family is gone. The trains sucked up the villages—"

He spoke three short, sparse sentences with the frugality of words that always marked the creed. He said:

"Just never fret. They will be back. The Führer stopped the trains."

# Chapter 94

In Mennotown, this is a source of gall to Archie even now: the Führer's soldiers came to Apanlee as liberators and as brothers.

The gates of Apanlee swung open to the Mystic Cross as wide as the arches permitted. The trees smelled like peppermint drops, and Faith in the Führer was all.

The Führer moved into a vacuum that had sat there, aching to be filled. Twin lightning struck the land like thunderbolts and flooded hearts with reverence and awe.

His ideas were right. It was simple.

He thundered forth the will of God: Thrift. Honesty. Cleanliness. The submission of children to parents, of servants to masters, of wives to their husbands—all old-fashioned, time-tested values. The gulash cannons parked in front of Apanlee, and that was good enough. Life added up. The walls of terror had fallen.

The Führer made clean sweeps through Russia—and not an hour too early! The Party profiteers were gone, upsetting chairs and tables as they ran!

Out of nowhere came a company of Hitler Youth on bicycles

with rucksacks on their backs to fill their cups with sparkling water from a brook. They said, their faces shining with their Faith: "The miracles our Führer has in store!"

That was the message now: give him your Faith and loyalty and gratitude—in fair exchange for peace. In Archie's churches, to this day, worshippers will believe much more, on much less evidence. In Apanlee, the future had a name again. The flags snapped in the breeze.

Three women climbed down from a train the Führer stopped with a strong fist—Marleen, Mimi and Erika.

Those three came back just in the nick of time to partake of the meager harvest that Dominik had left behind as he escaped to save himself from vengeance. Where he was hiding out was anybody's guess.

Natasha wouldn't tell.

Natasha acted odd at times; she cast scared glances left and right and mumbled to herself. When she crossed paths with Jonathan, she gave him brave, straight stares.

She, too, was glad that order had returned—so glad, in fact, that every time she heard a *Landser's* reassuring click of heel on heel on the hard steps of Apanlee, she beamed from ear to ear.

Natasha and Marleen once more switched domiciles, which both thought natural. The mud hut was Natasha's, as it had always been, and for Marleen it was the best again, as in the olden times: the homestead of her forebears where a floor doubled up as a ceiling.

By then, Natasha was too old to be of use to anyone except, perhaps, to sew a *Landser's* button on, but she came over often to help Marleen with this and that. While doing that, she hamstered. She did what she had always done—she saved up for a rainy day, for luck could not be trusted.

At times, she was so stiff that she could barely walk, but still she stole; she hoarded all she could. And no one said a word.

Marleen closed both her eyes. She knew she could afford to be indulgent with Natasha—so let Natasha hoard. There was

now food for everyone, including old Natasha; no need to squirrel away as she did. Regardless—old habits were ingrained.

Every bread crust, every chicken bone left over from a *Landser* meal ended up in Natasha's apron pocket or, if the treasure was too big, in empty crates that held provisions for the troops, shipped all the way from Germany. The shed that leaned against her hut was packed with hay and wood; that's where she stored the overflow.

"Bad times might come again," Natasha said and mopped a sweaty brow.

She looked as though her ear were cocked; it was as if she listened to some sounds nobody else could hear. She had begged an original icon from a dilapidated priest who came slinking out of hiding. She gave him her last ruble.

When Jonathan put a strong arm around Natasha's back and told her in an even voice: "Look here. Why be afraid? Who checked my underwear? Who taught me to sit on the potty?" she faced him with quivering jaw.

"You mean that, Jonathan?"

"Don't be a fool," he said. "You're one of us. Who hummed a hundred lullabies? Who chased away the wolf?"

She would not look at him and shooed him from her lean-to.

In weeks to come, she acted more and more peculiar. And once, when little Erika came up from behind to give her a brief hug, Natasha shot up from her milking stool as though someone had pricked her backside with a needle.

For weeks on end, the *Landsers* made their headquarters at Apanlee; they camped out even in the halls. The war was almost won; they talked and laughed and flirted brazenly with Mimi; and peace and certainty were everywhere; it was a wondrous time.

Steel plowed the earth. The engines throbbed. The sun poured light and warmth down from a blue, unblemished sky. The world was aglow with tomorrow. The Wehrmacht took its stunning conquests straight to the gates of Moscow.

Nobody asked: "After the glorious crusade—what?"

The Führer was the tool. From east to west, from north to south, the Führer and his *Landsers* stood side by side with God.

And best of all: after decades of bloodshed and anguish, Faith in a better tomorrow meant more than a thundering, triple *Sieg Heil.* It came with the promise of harvests.

For an entire generation, hell had hissed at Apanlee from every orifice. Now there was peace and calm. For the first time in more than twenty years, the anguished people had a shield. They could sleep through the night and fear nothing. No one came and pulled the Germans out of bed and said to them: "The censor wants to see you." They could stop mopping up the blood of loved ones in the dungeons of the Antichrist with sand and burlap rags.

No wonder that the Führer's Mystic Cross sank deep into the hearts of many trusting people. He was the good Lord's instrument. All credit went to him.

He had arrived, at zero hour, literally—without appreciable struggle. A single airplane came and scattered some machine gun fire at no one in particular, but all in all, there had been practically no fight; the sparrows chirped; the meadows lay dotted with haycocks.

The execution squads were gone. The goons the Antichrist had used were gone.

Hell belched them up. Hell took them back. The Führer drove them off.

The road was black with people who swallowed tears of joy until their stomachs ached, who peered at the enormous mass of field-gray men and tempered steel through bloated, red-rimmed eyes: "We were like beasts of burden. You came and set us free."

Before another month was gone, the Mystic Cross was everywhere, black lightning riding on white. A galaxy of stars burst in the sky and in a thousand hearts, as liberated people everywhere hung banners from their homes, strung garlands over

streets.

These people told the troops who still kept rolling, on and on, an avalanche of might and steel, across the sunbaked steppe: "You came while cattle cars were waiting at the siding. Now you are here, and we are free. Like summer lightning, summer thunder, your cannons cleared the air. Here, let us cool your feet."

They knelt before the soldiers; they held up bread and salt. By the thousands, they knelt in the dust and repeated:

"We were the world's forgotten chain gang."

"You drove away the Fiend."

"God sent you to us as His personal angels to slash broad swaths through the Red Terror."

"Who was responsible for so much suffering?" the Führer's soldiers asked.

The torches swayed. The fires flared. Flags fluttered in the breeze. The people lifted trembing arms and pointed to the onion domes: "The Beast. The Beast. The snow was red with murder."

"The Soviet-Jewish Beast," the field-grey soldiers said, and checked off village after village with neat, red pencil marks.

Soon, they were hunting for the culprits in the bushes. Face down, several enemies lay dead in the gutters.

Now everything was clear. The shoe was on the other foot. No one was willing to be caught among the Doubting Thomases.

The queues were gone. Once more, the world had order, and justice had a voice. All was as it should be. The people held aloft their babies so they could see the pageantry.

The soldiers all saluted smartly, and everything was happiness and joy. Enormous swastikas were hanging from the trees. The Führer meted out just punishment where punishment was due. He had kicked open the door to a sunflooded world—not because it was wrong and felt wicked, but because it was right and felt good.

"Say what you will," survivors say today. "There was an ach-

ing void. The Führer had the key. It's true we loved him—but you see? We loved him with just cause."

The decimated German settlers—pacifists!—said yes to Hitler as they said yes to God—for it was summer now; the sun kept spilling its magnificence out over countless graves.

Now they belonged to a much larger whole, they were part of a folk as the sunrays were part of the sun. The clouds were soft. The air was warm. The sun shone brightly all day long. Clean scents were wafting from the trees. The swallows chirped at each other in the branches.

This was a wondrous time for Mimi. Heads turned wherever she appeared. She knew that she was beautiful. Wherever fancy took her, that's where she headed now. The *Landsers* did their practice runs with flowers in their muzzles. No meeting lacked for songs.

She thought of Yuri, her beloved brother, each time the mystic cadence of the soldiers' ballads told of comrades—brothers, all!—all fallen for a better world. She thought of Sasha every time someone reminded her of Faith—for now she understood what powered him; now she had Faith as well.

And Marleen. How she worshipped!

She, too, had eyes to see and ears to hear, a pulsing heart that had not yet stopped beating. Her loved ones had not died in vain. They were limbs on the ancestral tree.

The sorcerer spread blueprints across tables.

*Lebensraum.*

That word! It struck a chord as old as her beliefs. The Communists had suffocated every lullaby; the Führer brought them back. The field-gray troops were everywhere; new life was stirring in the cradles.

You see? That's how it was. That's history. The Führer spoke persuasively: of dignity, of courage, of pride and self-respect. The Führer stocked the villages with geese.

The Gospel found its rightful place. The Führer brought it

back.

With broom and pail and roughened hands, the people went to work. This was their battle, too. The Führer spoke of ethnic unity. Now brother greeted brother without fear, and strangers became friends.

The people , after rolling up their sleeves, marched to the fields with spade and rake to take up battle with the weeds. Now it was sun-drenched days, and nights that smelled sweetly of wood.

Children waded barefoot in the waterhole of Apanlee. Teenagers swung their hoes and spades across their shoulders to reap the meager harvest the foe had left behind, and still had strength left over, when night fell, to partake in Teutonic festivals as shadowy and flickering as trees between two fires.

Those were bewitching times. The sky still glowed at midnight.

No wonder that the Führer called on Faith at every opportunity: it was the proper coin.

Faith, driven underground for two long, bloody decades, once more stood firmly resurrected. The hush of reverence that spread across the land again came from the very pages of their Holy Book, for years forbidden and condemned.

The church, re-opened and scrubbed clean of soot and chicken droppings, became re-charged with enormous energy. The faithful streamed inside to worship once again. A handful of preachers emerged out of hiding—lukewarm at first, and hesitant. Soon they began to see that anything that wasn't set in stone in terms of Gospel truth was open to interpretation. They briskly went to work. There was a lot of catching up to do, and that is what they did—delighted and a little scandalized and getting a bit blustery, because they, too, were drunk with Sun and Lightning.

Soon they developed muscle. "You render unto Caesar what is his, and unto God his due," they preached, and no one thought that wrong.

The one who came to preach at Apanlee wore heel-less shoes, a sheepskin and a nervous smile. His cough was bad; his eyes

were watery; he was an old and beaten man, his beard down to his belt. He was adept at diatribes. He spoke of the necessity of war: its cause and justification. He pointed out from the prophetic book how Gospel truth merged with the Führer's mandate.

He told them that the Mystic Cross was now the Cross of Christ, and having said what everybody knew, he coughed so hard he cracked a rib, and now he was in pain, and squirming. But here is what he said when he could speak again, and were there sweeter words?

"There will be an abundance of grain in the earth. Its fruit shall wave, like Lebanon."

He was a kindly fellow, many felt, though not too bright, but oh! how he could hunt for passages that verified the kind of Faith that served them well for centuries! He took authority for granted, and they did, too; the faithful knelt and pledged their all, scrubbed clean by their Saturday afternoon baths.

When Marleen took possession of the violated soil, she thought that she had long since emptied her heart of all tears. Now she discovered otherwise. She wept and could not stop.

Her tears of joy and gratitude kept brimming in her eyes as she sat by the window, knitting. This was her cause. She had to help. She knew she must. She would.

She, of an ancient pacifist tradition, worshipped the warriors' purpose. She had no sons left any more to give to the compelling cause, but had that been an option, she would have not restrained them. She would have said: "Go fight and take back what is yours!"

Had her sons not become as slaughtered lambs to feed the hungry Beast, would they not have been ardent vessels for the Führer?

The *Landsers w*ere her substitutes; she yearned to mother them. She could not have her fill. Clad in their summer uniforms, enjoying her belated watermelon crop, not caring that the winter lay ahead, they flooded Russia. Their songs rolled on like

thunder from the clouds. She kept on knitting: sock by sock, mitten after mitten. She put these neatly in a basket, for she knew well, as they did not, how cold a steppe night could be, once winter came again.

The *Landsers* teased her for her pains; the war was almost won; it was only a matter of weeks; they counted staunchly on being back in Germany by Christmas.

"Four weeks at the most. Maybe five," the *Landsers* told Marleen.

Natasha walked on eggshells at such times, and something odd, defying explanation, sat in her old and wrinkled face. Around the fires that Natasha built, with downcast eyes but ample ears, the timing of the Führer's final victory was daily speculation.

"So let us now give thanks," said Marleen before every meal.

With every window open to the breeze, she blessed the food out loud, now lavish on her table. She was allowed to work her garden without fear. She owned three cows again. She multiplied her baby chicks, and they grew into hens. Nobody came to her to threaten her with quotas.

Why not show gratitude in turn? And worship? And obedience?

She sewed for them; she cooked for them; she dragged huge pails of steaming soup; she gladly peeled potatoes. They let her dip into their gulash cannons and help herself to riches beyond words.

The window panes stopped creaking in the wind.

The shadow people watching her were gone.

She learned to smile again; she found that she could laugh. And she could sleep—oh, how she slept!—just thrilling to oblivion the moment her head hit the pillow. Her dreams were sweet again, like melting sugar cubes.

She welcomed scattered neighbors who had escaped the icy tomb, exchanging first sad news, then happy news, with hours left for gossip across the picket fence. All were invited for Sun-

day afternoon coffee. She gathered them often for supper. She gave them double helpings.

"It's but a matter of a few more weeks," said her guests, as deeply steeped in Faith as she, while spooning the food she prepared. She looked around and counted faces full of hope and certitude and knew she could enjoy her life again—a life well-ordered, disciplined, methodical, and principled. A life where no one broke the Ten Commandments. Where everything and everybody had his place. It was borscht and meat cutlets again. It was heaven.

She still knew what lay buried in the pit. That knowledge would not ever go away. There was lead in her soul; it was deep.

But now it was her anchor. Her grief had exhausted itself like embers turned to ashes; her world was filled with jubilance; the Wehrmacht couldn't be defeated, for right was on their side.

"Next year," she said to Mimi, who looked transformed as well, serenely sisterly to creatures big and small, "I count on a generous harvest—"

Why, in her very fingertips lay the warmth of the grain she would reap.

"I second that!" said Mimi.

Mimi had survived as well, and let no one ask how—the Beast's claws in her neck, her lips stuck to her teeth. She was still young, not even thirty years of age. Like many women of her decimated generation, she had hastily snatched at a small, modest dream in the terrorized years of the purges and had married a neighborhood boy in the Palace of Marriage, only to lose him the following year, head bowed, shackles on his feet. She watched him walk away, on foot, without his winter coat. Siberia swallowed him. She could barely remember his face. She seldom spoke of him. The only trace he left behind was Erika, who was a puzzle in herself. She, Mimi, often stared at her, completely in the dark about this thing called motherhood.

She had given birth on a day when the weather was hot, the humidity high. That day had left its scars. Her labor had been

difficult. When it was over, everything hurt; that's what she still remembered. Love was a luxury. A baby was a risk. All living flesh, the Soviet Party booklet said, belonged to the hammer and sickle.

In self-defense, her heart went blank and stayed that way—for was there anyone in those dark, bitter years who dared indulge the pulse of life when death was daily fare?

She stared at the newborn as though she were looking through glass. The infant stared back without blinking.

The outcome of that was confusion. It took a mental effort to even find a name.

She was glad she had Baba; she had yielded the infant to Baba who nestled it without another word in a narrow space between two cardboard boxes. Year after year went by. And by the time the *Landsers* came and lit up Apanlee from end to end—night after night!—with their Teutonic festivals she, Mimi, knew about from myths and fairytales but never had the freedom to experience, no doubt her husband's bones were bleaching in the tundra.

Now Mimi stood amid a multitude of young, flirtatious soldiers who made her feel so light of heart and nimble on her feet that she could barely find the goosepath, for Apanlee was overflowing with the bustle of the war.

A company of *Landsers* were sitting on the steps of Apanlee. The garden ran to roses. The coffee lid bobbed up and down. Zwieback cooled on the window sill. Two neighbors traded gossip across the fence that had since been repaired.

She knew that she was pretty. More than one *Landser* told her so. She blossomed in response. She fell in love, to no one's great surprise, with one of them, her cousin Jonathan.

When Jonathan appeared, Mimi was a woman famished for a life that offered normalcy. As far back as she was able to remember, she had spent every waking moment being lacerated, torn and bruised by her conflicting loyalties. Her Party? Or her family? Where was her rightful place?

She had grown numb with pain, fear, caution and fatigue. She yearned to have the ordinary things in life that made a woman feel that she had worth—a pair of shoes without a string to hold the sole in place, an Easter dress replete with belt to show her tiny waist. She pined for things like that. She knew no greater luxury, or ever would again.

"My dearest. *Lebensraum*! That's what it's all about," said Jonathan, and stroked her silken hair.

He still was shy with her; he stroked her hair a lot. She, on the other hand, had learned through stark necessity to take advantage of each opportunity, be it as fleeting as the breeze.

Here came one now. It came each day, in flashes of fire and noise. It was a message no one could ignore. It spoke to Mimi and to Jonathan: "Sow here your seed and let it grow. Tomorrow might not come."

She told him with a teasing smile: "Why wait when we don't know about tomorrow—" but he did not smile back.

"Our war is not yet won," said Jonathan. "Just listen to its voice."

He told her that he could not stay; he could not settle down to marry, for duty wrote the script.

She had a counter-argument. "It's now or never. That's my view."

He did not answer her. He stood, the colors of an autumn sunset in his face, his gaze fixed on the Beast still holed up in the Kremlin.

She leaned her head against his shoulder so she could smile at him. She was as bold in love as Jonathan was bold in war; she stood up to her ankles in yearning. They stood, entwined, beneath the ancient oak, with letters hewn into the trunk that said: "HK" and, underneath, "Natasha." The sap came down like tears and hardened on the bark.

She broke a drop and ate it for good luck. She knew that yesterday was gone, tomorrow might not come. Before it was too late, she clutched at what was near.

"Please, love. Please. Now."

"As soon as we have finished off the Bolsheviks, the instruments of Satan," said Jonathan.

"Please. Let's not wait."

"You do not understand."

"Oh, Jonathan. What's there to understand?"

His steel plowed the earth. His world was aglitter with triumph. In her young eyes, he was magnificent, a man's man and a warrior's warrior, intent on raining shrapnel on the map of Russia, leaving flaming streets and smoking hillocks, goring steel into the earth reddening the sun. She leaned against him, nestling him against her softness and her warmth. She had no time to waste. Before she blinked again, he would be gone; all men were gone before you blinked; in war, no man stayed with a women any length of time.

He said, while holding her: "How tall you are. How willowy you are!"

There was no conflict in her heart; she could tell just looking at him: this was her only chance. "Take off your belt so you can measure me."

It was in her blood and her fiber.

# Chapter 95

The Wehrmacht kept on driving hard against the gasping heart of Russia, and Doctorjay—sedately watching Europe sliding slowly into chaos, thanks to a tyrant's avarice, as he had since found out—was mighty glad that, in the State of Kansas, the bureaucrats were nesting program within program to help the poor man out, thus honoring equality as a political ideal.

He was a happy man; he relished moral victories like that. Besides, he still had Abigail to nuzzle. When Abigail put on her sparklers and high heels and sashayed down the sidewalk to celebrate yet one more patriotic holiday, the geezer was beside himself with wonderment and awe. The blood, claimed Abigail while blushing prettily, rushed to his head and elsewhere, for Doctorjay was still a citizen of undiminished energy, who passed his flask around—to the delight of other sinners like himself.

"Hip! Hip! Hooray! Hooray for victory!"

What with the diphthongs back in standing and in the sky the kind of sun that coaxed the flavors of the good life from the earth, Doctorjay wore his beer belly once again with proper ethnic pride. Although an isolationist, he toasted every battle. It did not mat-

ter much who won, who lost; excitement was what counted. He hated taking sides. It pained him that there should be war—but it was someone else's war. He didn't interfere. Three days before another barbecue was due, his mouth began to water. The townsfolk marveled at his appetite: he counted the seconds to supper.

"This much I know," he said, agreeing with his president, whom he esteemed above all other men on earth, "America has better things to do than get involved in other people's skirmishes. We have no business overseas. We've got to clean up our own backyard."

If one examined the erratic European map, as Doctorjay still did, despite glaucoma in one eye and spreading to the other, you saw the Führer triumphed over practically all of smoking Eastern Europe. His swastika swayed merrily from the Acropolis. His panzers kept on gobbling up the acres.

But not for long, the *New York Times* spelled out with its Sunday cartoons, all showing how to goose-step and be silly.

"The year will soon be running out of days," announced a sanguine Doctorjay who proudly sat astride a sturdily recovering America and whistled. "And the pretentious Führer out of his masquerades, pretensions and excuses."

"Right! Right! We've got to swat the Hun!" fumed Archibald, and foamed his chin with care before a mirror. Archie went so far as to dispatch a letter to the Führer to tell him what he thought. It ran six pages long.

"In my book, stupid, you are Coward Number One," concluded Archibald. "You will never survive your confetti."

He called the Führer many names, all of them roundly deserved. He even sent a telegram, and then another and another, before he realized the Führer had no use for Archibald's opinion and only piled his newest victory on yet another victory, with no end anywhere in sight.

The Kansas farmers clucked their tongues and shook their heads as word came that the Führer was tucking city after Euro-

pean city in his pocket. The European continent, a powder keg in any case, seemed near on to exploding, but people kept on stuffing wads of cotton in their ears, with shrugs or nods, depending.

Their attitude was this: a global war, should it materialize, would surely bring upheaval and disruption, but after all the dust was settled, wheat prices would shoot up to the sky.

A quiet life, a decent death. Once more, that was the formula. There was an ocean to the east; behind that ocean was a war that kept on belching fire, but it was someone else's war. The Kansas earth was good.

Each family was connected to the next, and not a button missing.

You knew about each other, for many generations back.

Your children's children came of age. They joined your church. If they did not and, sadly, let themselves be lured into the Baptists' net, with ice cream socials yet, no one could respect you.

To prove yourself worthy was always the aim. You lived with modest pride. You slept on the approval of others. The Lord was your personal steward and friend; you knew nobody sound and fit who did not likewise believe in the Lord and His benevolent mandate.

A hornet's nest, by contrast and comparison, across the murky waters, where the Führer was marching his armies. The Führer was cursing the Jews.

"And such an ass!" they said, because that's what the papers said, which many now consumed. This sentiment, likewise, was echoed on the radio. The announcers foreshadowed that there was no stopping the *Heinis*.

Each morning, Archibald beseeched the Lord for blessings upon blessings for every worthy Christian and Jew, starting with the heads of families and ending with each suckling. He skipped the Huns and heathens.

"We're Christians, yes. We're all for peace. We can't bow down before the Antichrist, however," was his repeated verdict,

and even Josie marveled at his skill in treading safety lines between warmongering and isolationism, the newest political "ism."

She, too, agreed: a Christian had a duty. Where she was coming from, Equality, Fraternity and Liberty were in.

While this conversation took place, Archie was finishing off a box of crackers while rocking gently on the porch. Before him, on a footstool, perched the ballooning Temperance, who was always the first to applaud, the last to stop clapping, when Archie said something important.

"Another slice of pie, if you don't mind," said Temperance, and deftly helped herself. "Would you be kind enough?"

"Here goes," said Archibald. "Onward, onward—Christian soldiers! That is my motto now."

She knew he was a pacifist; for centuries, he and his people had been pacifists; war was not of their world. Whenever she was agitated—and now she was! and how!—she hardly ever closed her lips. As soon as she sat down for snacks, she opened her mouth wide.

"Say, Archibald. Tell me what's on your mind. All feelings need an airing."

She was a sturdy girl, the good life showing in both bust and waist; she never pushed her food around, whereas he picked at his as though he were a bird.

"You wouldn't understand."

Her daily motto was: anything to fill the stomach. She spoke with her mouth full: "Tell me. Why are you so obsessed with soldiering? I am not easily put out." Making something of herself was one priority for Temperance, and that included rounding out both hips and personality. "I'm willing to believe the worst," coaxed Temperance. "Meanwhile, I'll do the dishes. Just go ahead and fill me in. I'm eager to improve."

He wrapped himself in silence.

She watched him from the sink. She had her instincts pat. She dried her hands and tapped him on the shoulder. "Look here. Just take the plunge. Stop shilly-shallying."

"Who's shilly-shallying?" His voice rose half an octave.

"You are. I know of one or two who, if they could, would overlook most anything to be a preacher's wife."

"You're talking of yourself, I take it?"

"I hang my wash on Monday and iron it on Tuesday. And not a weed grows in my carrot patch."

"We aren't suited to each other. We'll never understand each other. Besides, there may be war. If war breaks out, a lot is bound to change. We'll have to rearrange priorities."

She could not understand the hunger of his nature. She tried to tell him that. She argued, flushing pink: "Small wonder you walk like a dandy. Forgive me. I almost spoke my opinion."

"Maybe," he said with an embarrassed laugh, "it's just my circulation?"

She nearly died of shock. Nothing he said after that brought them closer.

He had padlocked his heart. She decided to cry herself sick.

Although Doctorjay was now retired and had stopped practicing his herbal medicine, he was still well-received in all the homes he visited, where he would sit on people's davenports and let himself be spoiled.

Here's how he voiced his sentiments: "Not that I need, at my age, to give my two-cents' worth. Let me say something here and now, however, and with complete and honest candor. The war? It's none of our business. Who wants to go kill or be killed for the Jews?"

That might have been shocking, but wasn't.

It wasn't that nobody cared; they did; they cared a lot; they were outspoken in their disapproval at how the the Führer was treating the Jews. More and more stories kept on spilling forth across the paper margins of how the European Hebrews could not use libraries and were required now, as per the Führer's latest edict, to get delousing papers.

"By contrast and comparison," thought Doctorjay out loud, "America encourages the Jews to be more Jewish than even they already are."

To that, a lot of bobbing heads. The scribblers were raking the mud with their pens. The task at hand was to be fair to everyone, but steer the safety line. But on the other hand, you knew from past experience the Hebrews worshipped Mammon and did not like to hear of Jesus. They also kept unlisted telephones, which made you wonder why.

If Hebrews had a grievance—and the good Lord was witness to the fact the Hebrews kvetched about their rights until your patience frazzled out like a sombrero— you put that grievance to the vote. That's how you handled grievances.

In Mennotown, the consensus in the pre-war years was this: there was much too much fuss about the problems of the Jews.

You asked a Hebrew what he wanted, and he would tell you: more. That irked a lot of folks. Besides, the Bible talked of usury, which caused additional concern. But since this was America, you had your checks and balances. You voted your leadership in, and you voted your leadership out. That's what the Constitution meant—an instrument to pave the way for equal chance for everyone, and that included Hebrews.

You got along with them. They got along with you. That was the formula. Gone were the days when Mennotown youngsters ran at the top of their speed to lock gates and keep them away. It was a well-known fact in Mennotown that Jews were flaming liberals, but no one in America would dream of putting matches to a synagogue. No, never in America! With proper courtesy, Jews lit their candle lights at Christmas, like everybody else. They respected your neighborhood picnic where, nowadays, true Christians mingled with all kinds of foreigners. Modernity and tolerance were in. Little Melly played Bingo for Britain.

The shadows fell farther and farther across the wastes of Russia. And somewhere in the depths of the Ukraine, there still lay Apanlee. Despite the lapse of time, it still had mystic qualities. When Josephine remembered Apanlee, it was with a catch in her

throat. A well-crafted poem could bring out that feeling in her.

It had been many years since she'd received the last of those alarming missives out of Russia. She hadn't heard from anyone at Apanlee for quite some time; she feared she never would. Her drawers were still crammed with envelopes, all yellow now with time.

"I hope they aren't being buffaloed by all that Führer razzle-dazzle," she voiced her attitude.

She didn't know what had become of her remaining Russian relatives, and by this time, the truth be told, she barely even cared. "All that is dust and ashes," she told the neighborhood, although she hoped in some vague way the folks of Apanlee had sense enough to put up barricades to stop the Huns from flooding the Ukraine.

"Do you suppose they, being pacifists, will take up arms against the Führer? If so, I wouldn't be surprised."

"I certainly hope so! They better!" said Archibald while slurping cabbage soup. "They would be foolish not to."

She looked at him approvingly. It was a treat to hear him utter something with which she could agree.

"Had I been born a Methodist," said Archibald after a pause, "I would be up there, too, just shooting down the Heinies."

"Me, too. Had I been born a man."

That was the old, defiant Josie—hot back from Wichita, where she had reconnected with the Finkelsteins, albeit only temporarily. "To get an update," she half-apologized, but she was gratified that no one seemed to mind.

She made no bones about the fact she was relieved to learn the Communists, now fighting off the Hitler Army in the vicinity of Moscow, proved to be stubborn fighters after all. She thought it was ironic that—now that she had foresworn her youthful politics and tried to be like anybody else—to be a liberal of sorts regarding Soviet Russia was suddenly the rage.

For many years, it had been Josephine who took vicarious pride in the astounding triumphs of the Revolution. "They'll

win," she now said energetically. "I feel it in my bones."

"Of course they'll win," said Archibald, while gnawing on a chicken leg. "For right is on their side."

"God willing," Josie said who rarely went to church.

With growing worry, by and by, she watched the conflict from afar. She, too, had watched the Führer trample across Poland, surge his victorious Wehrmacht through Belgium, slice France in half, put Messerschmitts into the skies and boats below the water level. All that, in one big sweep! It took your breath away! Already, German planes were nipping at the Kremlin.

She, too, looked on with horror as the Führer tried to sweep Europe clean of every last Jew. Her heart contracted for the cause: Jews had it rough; their lot was persecution; they had fallen on desperate times. They had to sit on yellow benches and were forbidden telephones. She had all that on excellent authority.

As far as Josie was concerned, a toddler knew that Hitler was a curse from heaven, that Lenin and Stalin were heroes. All polls showed very clearly as that year drew to a close: three out of every four citizens of the United States now wanted Soviet Russia to triumph militarily.

Meanwhile, there was still Temperance, allied with Little Melly, who still believed it was imperative for Archibald to venture forth and remedy the situation regarding being single before it was too late.

For Archie was eyeing the war. He wasn't getting any younger, and Little Melly thought of Temperance as Archie's last salvation.

She found no faults with Temperance, who oiled her hair with butter and tracked gossip as though she were tracking wild game. She relished long good-byes. Her napkins had the fanciest stitch. Her bridal chest was stuffed to overflowing since she was practical; she did not have excessive suitors, and had to stand prepared.

Each day, it was assault anew: "Well, look who's here! Look who's come visiting."

Here was a sturdy maiden, for the asking, to her liking, turning the pages daintily while Little Melly read her *Daily Thoughts*, now in big print, alas. Here was a female punctual with meals. who counted eggs, who measured salt, who preferred the brown earthenware crock. These skills didn't pass out of fashion.

"Surprise! Surprise! It's Temperance—in all her finery!" Little Melly motioned Temperance into the kitchen where Archie was spooning his gruel; he nearly jumped out of his skin. "Look. All she wants out of her life is to be speedily betrothed to a good and worthy man. Is that too much to ask?"

It nearly drove her wild. Here was a placid female who would have treated an old, ailing aunt with deference. She came from a good family that had a porch that ran around the house, and on it grew geraniums. She had claim to a great deal of land. She was perfect in every known way. She might become a healing influence on Archie's oddities, his fascination with the European fracas being one.

Little Melly resolved to wear down Archie's objections. She pushed herself to the limit, urging Archibald to be a man in any manner possible, but Archie showed no inclination whatsoever; he looked at Temperance without the slightest interest.

"It is high time I had a younger set of hands to help me in my kitchen," said Little Melly one last time. "Please. Pay attention, Archie. One spinster in the family is enough!"

That's what she told him, every day. By then, a flood of tears was riding in her nose. "I welcome help", she argued heatedly. She mopped at the table, all the while mopping her tears.

His eye was dim but wary.

"My back is troubling me," she amplified. "I can't sleep; my appetite leaves much to be desired; my bowels are way off. I could have married, in my time. Look at me, crooked with age."

She wrung her old, arthritic hands, but Archie did not feel the call. He didn't want to marry. Despite his religiosity, he kept on glossing over Songs of Solomon.

In weeks that followed, Little Melly gave herself an educa-

tion on the forbidden subject but came away unsatisfied. That Archibald was very odd was clear, but what that meant was still a mystery.

And Doctorjay was no help either. He turned two huge deaf ears to her; he only nudged her, coarsely. "If nothing else, then mustard plaster on his rump."

She hated that. When Doctorjay was drinking, he said what others merely thought. He was the old-time tippler still that he had always been, proud of his wayward tongue.

"Something is gnawing on his spirit, and what that is, is anybody's guess."

He told her this and that.

Her mouth dropped open and stayed open.

Doctorjay had studied Archibald as though he were an insect. He had prescribed a lot of special herbs to strengthen crucial muscles. All that to no avail. It was as though cold sweat engulfed this middle-aging bachelor at any matrimonial thought. In summary, the man must have been a late bloomer, to put it euphemistically. Church socials for the single members of his congregation left him cold.

The midwife beamed at him to let him know that human nature did not change. "Girls will be girls," said she, "and boys are boys. Your attitude is disconcerting, Archie!"

He did not answer her. Instead, he bolted for the door.

The clues were manifold. He had a childish streak. He loved to build miniature cities from Little Melly's spools, some fourteen levels high, so he could kick them over. He listened with pursed lips and half-closed lids as the detested conflict overseas kept lashing at the earth with hollow, smacking sounds.

"We're pacifists," said Little Melly firmly. "That is one fine excuse!"

"We are Americans. It's up to us. It's up to us to tidy up the world." He sat there, gazing vengefully into a vexing distance, clearly in a spiteful mood. She saw his hands were shaking badly; his knees would not stop trembling. It was clear he felt blood in his mouth.

That kind of anger on an empty stomach? She tried hard not to show alarm.

"Come, Archibald. Here is an extra sweater. Let's you and I take our after-dinner stroll to make sure that we understand each other. You can't afford to get involved in war. You are a minister. You're in a vital business. It's time to take a stand for pacifism, and set a firm example."

That was her finest argument, but Archie merely glared. Wild rumors flew the length of Mennotown that one demented pacifist, out there in Reedley, California, had already harnessed himself to the Führer. That someone from within the creed should be involved in something that politically grotesque came as a sickening surprise.

# Chapter 96

Five relatives arrived by Greyhound bus for an extended stay from Winnipeg to help plan Rarey's wedding. Outside, the snow fell softly. Pine logs threw scented sparks. The windows shone with warmth and hospitality—weeks had been spent to bake and fry and cook.

That fateful morning, when infamy went down in history, as children are now taught in school, Little Melly held a bread loaf firmly to her bosom and cut fat slices for her guests, while Temperance unwrapped the ornaments to trim the Christmas tree. Doctorjay was rocking by the fire with both ears glued to the wireless to hear, as he would later claim, the latest news on Heinieland while hoping to hit Amos 'n Andy to help his belch along, when suddenly he caught the bulletin.

More ships lost in an hour than every ship destroyed in the entire previous war!

The news came as a horrid shock. The baseness of the Japanese sent the entire nation reeling. The president of the United States, with deep folds bracketing his mouth, put down his hot dog and his milkshake and ordered the Army and Navy: "Fight

back!"

Archie and Rarey both sprang to their feet. Doctorjay shook off his warm comforter and roared as though he had been struck. That morning, Little Melly, distracted by her gout and therefore, slow in getting dressed, forgot all modesty and rushed into the streets in morning robe and frayed pajamas.

"We'll gun the Hun! We'll get the Kraut! We'll lick the Heinies!" moaned Archie.

Outside was pandemonium. Brakes screeched. Somebody screamed. A thousand whistles blew. A hasty victory parade brought out Salvation Army sisters by the scores to ready lemonade stands for thirsty recruits. Feelings ran at a fever pitch. Kate Smith sang ringingly in every square.

War came with a roar and found deep, twisted roots that ran with ethnic sap.

All Germans, overnight, turned brutish in appearance, demented beyond words. Sedate and somber patriots sat in the ballfield bleachers, seething. A motorist ran down the same Holsteiner twice. Rotarians tried in vain to quiet the luncheons down. Even the Donoghues' mongrels kept moving their tails in broad sweeps.

The preachers jabbed the Bible with their fingers: the total devastation of the wicked was duty! and if you did not do your duty for your country, then God was very cross!

Before a week was gone, a lot of folks wore V! emblazoned on their chest, which stood, of course, for Victory, for that was a foregone conclusion. Astrologers confirmed what everybody knew: "No way can America lose!"

Only Josie sat silent and stunned, her feelings tumbling down into a vast abyss, like grains into an elevator shaft.

Temperance saw her chance right then and there and rushed to Archie's side. "You'll see! You'll see! You'll watch the nickels rain into your war relief!"

She had come visiting the previous night and, as it happened, was still there, just sitting, meditating, by the window, while deftly picking out a seam and pondering her sad predicament—for tack-

ling Archie was harder than ever!—when her entire world turned upside down as though it were a milking stool. A spell came over Archie. Before her very eyes, he grew ten feet in height. He wanted more than a vicarious victory; he wanted soldiering. He wanted soldiering so bad his teeth hurt from his wish!

After Sunday services, while folks still milled about and traded up on news, he stepped up forcefully to little neighbor clusters and waved the newest bulletin.

"Give me the leather," shouted Archie, "and I will make the shoes." The war was belching fire; the Jews were an endangered species, and Archie itched to go and boost democracy. Little Melly kept wringing her little plump hands. Still, she tried one last time and pushed a giggling Temperance right in his way so that he had to walk around her as she prepared the chicken stew—and once she even pulled his earlobe teasingly, and Little Melly's hopes soared to the sky!—but nothing came of that.

"Well, Temperance," said Archibald. "I'm off. That's it! I am enlisting voluntarily."

He heard a high-pitched giggle and realized it was his own. He combed his sprouting mustache then and there and twirled it at both ends, while Temperance stood, watching him, aghast at what she saw.

In Mennotown, the Elders claim today some young folk did resist: a handful went to jail for their beliefs; a few slipped off to Canada, and others volunteered to work in mental hospitals and institutions. But all in all, to slay the Hun was duty! The local sign-up station had queues three times around the block.

There was little the Elders could do. Their sermons stopped revolving placidly around the blood of Christ, that had been shed on Golgatha for people to know peace; instead, their prayers now asked God to rip the Führer's flags to shreds and blast away his cannons. Their hands grew swollen from the fervent handshakes of congregation members who agreed.

The Elders had their work cut out. Nobody envied them. The youngsters glared and said: "The Lutherans and Methodists

will do!" and flung away their pacifist tradition, as though it were an apple core, without a further thought. The Elders' moral stance was not an easy one; their flivvers had C-stickers. Few were the citizens of Mennotown who dared besmirch America's fine reputation by hiding behind loopholes in the Bible.

"We're not allowed to kill," the Elders argued biblically, reflecting pacifist tradition, but stopped just short of praying that somebody else would do the job—for it was crystal clear to all before another month was gone: the Führer was the Antichrist; and Satan must be stopped. The wireless and papers spelled it out.

The prairie ached for war. A blizzard of confetti was raining down on Kansas.

Tanks, planes, and guns began to roll off sleek assembly lines, ships rose in navy yards. All kinds of wartime plants kept mushrooming in Wichita, producing boots and tents. Machine guns. Helmets. Hand grenades. Nobody put it into words, but it was clear not only to the Jews engaged in various wartime scams, but to the average citizen: America saw war as business, both morally and economically.

Frugality was once again the watchword of the day. Thrift Saving Stamps were the rage. Streetcars saved on gasoline by making fewer stops. The neighborhood collected toothpaste tubes.

The White House sent out bulletins: go easy on the sugar, and Little Melly, mindful of her bees, ran to restock a dormant hive. She even went so far as to suppress complaints about irregularity and sent the money saved from doctoring her innards off to war relief. The soldiers wanted warmer socks, and Josie joined a knitting club. Not even the egg slump could trigger a sneer out of Daisy.

As in the First World War, this was no soup-and-sandwich operation! The mandate, black on white: let's shower the Heinies with bullets!

The outbreak of the war changed many things in Mennotown,

chiefly the ethnic web—with it, the Christian mode. Before they even understood just what was creeping up on them, the Elders eased up on their wrath about the wicked flickers and went to stand in line themselves, no matter how the blizzards blew, to watch big action films where they could sit and chortle—a chortle, for the uninitiated, consisted of a combination of a chuckle and a snort—at how the Hun was licked.

Tallulah Bankhead put a picture of the Führer on the bottom of her chamber pot, and Marlene Dietrich offered her own blood for the Red Army's wounded.

Flashlight in hand, Josie went to perform in a Wichita play, becoming the Statue of Liberty. She delved into her quicksilver mind and came up with a poem that glorified Stalin. The radio spread his wisdom. The papers sang his praise. The reporters had wonderful things to report. The Mennotown Chamber of Commerce sold gum for a penny apiece, leading the cheers to boost the valiant Red Army's morale. Doctorjay missed not a single friendship rally to help the Soviets win. He practiced his war whoops until he ran out of breath and peach brandy. The merchants and the moneylenderss joined in repeated toasts: "Hey, Uncle Joe! Hey, Uncle Joe! Here's to you, Uncle Joe!"

A strange, historic time—to see two awkward giants, the Soviet Union and America, all of a sudden hug each other clumsily.

In every German language church, it rained donations for needy Soviet orphans. To Russia from Mennotown, with love!

The European war was welcomed as a necessary evil: it ended a difficult decade and roused them as never before. Banned were dumplings once again, along with dachshunds, diphthongs and *umlauts*! Down came the signs on Lindbergh Terrace!

It was the time to put your shoulder to the wheel and shove! The demarcation line between a hero and a brute was clear!

No wonder, therefore, when the Elders came to Archie Epp, a bachelor, not yet ordained, still filling in at services—that's when they hit a snag.

No mealy mouth was Archie. No pacifism here!

Not even the tippling herbalist helped. Archie pushed them all aside like chaff, he was that mad with rage. All that had precedents. When the detested school yard bullies pushed him down into the weeds and called him names that hurt because he was a German—that's when it all began! The ethnic slurs were etched upon his brain, and ever since, something danced in his head that looked like a flashing red light. He had been eight years old when he threw down his spelling book and ran. Now he was aging prematurely; he knew he was no Adonis. He knew that he was balding, pimply and obese, and getting on in years. But deep inside there lived the spirit of a child who never shed his shame.

The stain of ethnic hate had left him blinded in one eye; now a retaliating hate broke into blossom in full force. He stood tall at a Rotary meeting and shouted: "Gun the Hun! Gun the Hun!" In church, he never missed taking up special collections for Stalin. He was resolved to bomb the face of Germany. He savored hate for all things German; he filled his mouth with it; his eyes were fever-bright with fervor; wrath flooded every sinew.

Three days after Pearl Harbor, he stood up in the middle of a meal, pushed his *vareniki* aside and told a dozen startled faces:

"To hell with Adolf Hitler!"

He broke his aunt's old heart. She wept: "You'll see! You'll see! You'll come home in a gunny sack—!" but Archibald just shrugged. Little Melly lost weight; Little Melly lost face; Archie had made up his mind; Archie was aching for battle.

"Why now? Why, Archie? Now? Why bring such shame upon us now? You can't! The churches need you here! I've told you many times before; you're in a vital business."

A flub dub—Archie Epp? No mollycoddle, Archie! He wiped the gravy off his chin and snarled at Temperance to get out of his way.

Poor Temperance, close to the finish line! The relatives had probed her worth already and verified she would not spend her

husband's money freely. She tried to calm him down by patting him most everywhere, but he gave her a shove.

"The dirty yellow Japs! The low-life, miserable Huns!"

She howled while seeing him depart. "Why not be a soldier for Christ?"

"War chaplain? That's a laugh! I'll spit into the Rhine!"

He was amazing, even to himself. He did not even know he had such eloquence.

The war slammed a hard cleaver smack into Archie's heart. It took the Führer's war to make him realize that there was something deep within, penned up like a beast within a cage. He knew with the conviction nursed on his childhood torment that he, who still woke in a sweat for fear that he had wet his bed, was singled out by destiny to fight a manly war. Since kindergarten he had hated being German. Here was his opportunity to finish off a ghost.

So let the rest be pacifist!

His mouth turned dry with vehemence. The idle tongues had always called him sissy; here was his chance; he could redeem his manliness. He would rain fire down on Naziland and return with a chestful of medals. Somebody had to put his heel right on the Führer's neck, and that might just be Archie. He tasted battle on his tongue and fire in his veins.

"If you leave me behind, I might become a Methodist," wept Temperance. That's how distraught she was.

He was unmoved, however. What fun awaited him as he would let the righteous bombs of America crash on the wicked German towns! He surged; he soared; he plummeted—triggering bombs in his mind like a shower of hail, as he had seen it many times on the forbidden flivver screen. To risk your life and limb for Freedom, Justice and Equality was one good way to help your country out.

He snarled at Temperance: "I'm going, and that's it! Stop howling now! That's my advice. And better find yourself another husband while you can!" The shirkers were in hiding; the

heroes went to war! He mounted Doctorjay's old old bicycle and headed for the noise.

Before his country's clarion call to go to war and save democracy fell into Archie's lap, he had dimly sensed that something was askew inside his personality. He knew he was no hero. He tried to disappear into his coat the moment trouble brewed. He liked his towels toasted.

All that changed now. No one would ever doubt his masculinity again. He pedaled all the way to Wichita to stand in line where many recruits stood already, waiting, some of them beneath umbrellas.

He stopped where it said "E," because Epp was his name.

Ahead of him, in a long row marked "D." stood several Donoghues who snickered.

"Well, look who's here! Look who's enlisting. The yellow fellow, folks, " said one, just loud enough for several heads to swivel.

The uniformed induction officer gave Archie a brisk push. "What's the matter with your eye?"

"I w-w-w-ant to go—" said Archibald, which caused an explosion of mirth.

"You do? Well, hold your stream a bit, now, buster, will you? Okay, now, fellows. Move! Just step aside here, mister. We don't need damaged goods. This is a war. This isn't kindergarten."

"A to L to the right."

"M to Z to the left."

"Move! I said move! Look, do I have all day? All cripples, fags, CO's, Jehovah Witnesses, and jackals, out the door!"

There was nothing to do but obey, so maligned was the enemy's cause.

When the induction papers came for Rarey, he folded his easel, dried off his brushes, put down his charcoal, and asked: "Why should I die for my country? Why can't I live for my country?"

but his voice held the timbre of pride.

"Son, let your conscience be your guide," said Josephine, a proud but saddened mother. Had she been a man, she would have sprung to the colors. She took the missive from his hand and read it carefully. "Greetings," said the postcard, simply, and told her last-born where to go. The sounds of war that shrieked out of the wireless were frightening indeed.

"If there's a wrong, somebody has to right the wrong. Although in quiet moments—"

She never finished what she meant to say, for such was the fervor of war. She only knew: that good was good, and evil, evil—and evil must be stopped.

She lived and died. She never knew. No, Josie never knew.

She never understood why her own country took her last-born by the shoulders, vociferating: "Liberty! Fraternity! Equality!" and made her step aside. This is the peerless irony that Josie lived and died and never knew: it was a fratricidal war. It never dawned on her.

Peace zealots they had been, the Neufeld clan that grew the wheat that feeds the world today; peace zealots they remained—until this war exploded. Right by her kitchen sink.

She should have known but didn't. She may have been a liberal out of the hunger of her mind; she knew her Rarey was a pacifist, by nature and by training; his father had been pacifist; his grandfather as well; for centuries, the Neufeld tribe had managed to resist with tooth and nail the mandate of the sword.

It all fell by the wayside. It all was stripped away.

The New World Order was simplicity itself: it came in shibboleths. The country called on Rarey; the country needed him; he had to put his shoulder to the wheel of history and shove.

"The Führer must be stopped," said Josephine, while everything around her blurred.

For the briefest of moments, she felt a wild panic, but she struggled it down as she must. She was well-read; she had informed herself; she knew that fire rained down on England; that Denmark and Norway had been invaded by land, air and sea;

Luxembourg, Belgium and France had fallen. And now the madman's Wehrmacht, the papers hammered at her day by day in savage feature stories, kept slicing with swift razor strokes through Josie's childhood Russia in several dozen different places while laying both cities and hamlets to ashes!

The eyes of the entire world, the *New York Times* proclaimed in flaming editorials, were fastened on America, the land of Liberty! Equality! Fraternity! There was no time to lose!

"Son, do as you think best. Your country calls on you. I am so proud—"

Her voice broke from the strain of her emotions, but here it was; this was a righteous war; the stars and stripes gave meaning.

Before that day, she had not known a human heart could hold such sadness, yet such pride. Long rays of light were streaking through the skies. While salty tears clogged up her nose, she felt her heart melt like a candle.

She said to him whom she loved more than life: "This is my finest day."

Her Rarey was a hero, not a shirker; he pledged his life to serve the principles that she held dear and always would: that people were created equal; that all deserved a chance.

A plaque in his honor affirms it. That plaque still hangs in Rarey's room, next to his Boy Scout trophies. It tells all visitors Rarey Neufeld did not hide behind the Scriptures; his ear drums did not show some unexpected holes. He did his duty, as he must—to slay the Antichrist.

The plan had been for Betty Lou and Rarey to be married in four weeks, but it took sacrifice. There was no time to stitch a wedding dress—a print frock, that was all.

They married on a weekend pass. The bride, of course, wore something old and something new, something borrowed, something blue. The bridegroom wore his country's uniform. The buckle that snapped around his waist. It was a cold and dreary day. Thick ice stuck to the window panes and on the Plexiglas of

the smooth plane that took him from the prairie, death tucked beneath its wings. Before him stretched in a long blur an unsettling horizon. Below him dropped away the fields that grew the winter wheat that ethnic pride had sowed—now cold and bleak.

Denuded. Wintry. Stripped.

# Chapter 97

The Führer drove his armored wedges deep and ever deeper into the east to pulverize the onion domes and finish off the Antichrist so German women, left behind, could keep on bringing in the harvest. At Apanlee, it was potato peeling all day long, and often far into the night, as added *Landsers* poured across the steppe. The bells were ringing merrily; the Hitler youth clicked heels; the cannons fired wildly; and everybody cheered. There was nothing to dampen their spirits.

Marleen did all she could to help the war along and speed up victory. She stood by her window and watched, gratitude thick in her heart.

"Soon, winter comes. The roads grow slick with snow. What do you know of Russia? Here is another pair of mittens."

The *Landsers* gave her back her rightful legacy, as heady as smooth wine. A river was returning to its bed. Her blurred gaze fastened on the flags that floated in the breeze, as memories of days gone by when she was forced to raise the mounds of earth about her murdered kin sank to the bottom of her heart. The Führer did exactly as he pleased, and that was fine with her; his

horses were swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves. He flew as the eagle that hastened to eat. All that was in her Bible. She read it every night and left it on her window sill, scrubbed clean of every trace of blood, in plain view of the night.

Marleen supervised, Natasha obeyed, and Mimi followed her instincts. She was pretty and clever and young. She was chock-full of youth, love, and rapture.

The Führer put her duties down for her in black and white, and she submitted gladly. She didn't waste her Sundays.

Submission for the greater good.

Forbearance.

Duty.

Sacrifice.

All those were heady words that put a haze across her heart as though with fine gossamer cloth. Six days a week, she wore the Red Cross emblem on her sleeve—for, more and more, the trains were hauling in the wounded, and every hand was needed.

She did her duties joyfully. Her energies were focused.

At times, there were at Apanlee more soldiers than civilians, and she noticed the *Landsers* looked younger and younger. Their steps were firm, precise, and robust. They smiled at her and waved while marching briskly to the beat of battle songs:

*"Und welcher Feind auch kommt*
*mit Macht und List,*
*seid nur ewig treu, ihr Kameraden,*
*der Herrgott, der im Himmel ist,*
*liebt die Treue der jungen Soldaten—"*

She kept tapping her foot to the beat. Their cause was just and good. Their songs were songs of love and tears; they spoke of brotherhood, of vigilance, of sunshine and fresh air. She listened by the window and knew they sang to her.

That was the only happy time life ever granted Mimi. Wherever she appeared, there were admiring whistles—not that it mattered much; her heart was chained to Jonathan's as though

by golden shackles.

Love was precarious, as sweet as dreamless sleep.

She felt that she would drown in joy. The *Landsers* kept on singing, without let-up, often far into the night—sometimes with raucous vigor, but often in a tender mood.

*". . . auf der Heide blüht ein kleines Blümelein*
*und das heißt—zwei, drei, vier!—Erika!"*

In the morning, the soldiers made a great deal of noise, but at night, with the moon in the sky and the air sweet with hay, their songs were romance and flirtation:

*". . . und dann ist es mir, als fragt es traut:*
*Denkst du auch an deine kleine Braut?"*

She loved their songs—as jubilant as larks that shot out of the furrows, as sad as a walk in wet woods.

*"In der Heimat weint um dich ein Mägdelein*
*und das heißt—zwei, drei, vier!—Erika!"*

They were young Germany. They were the best the Fatherland sent forth to craft a better world.

Her reasoning was simple: since there was justice in the universe, she knew that they would win. They would embrace the onion domes with a firm ring of tempered steel, with sirens howling and guns blazing; all that was still to come.

She still had the walk of a cat, for habits were habits and her habits died slowly, but now she was purring; she longed to be stroked and caressed. Where the *Landsers* were sitting, right on the steps of Apanlee, dangling their long legs, reliving the latest assault, she was glad to stop by for a chat.

"It's dogfight after dogfight. Right?" She had absorbed from them the attitude that nothing could defeat them.

"We'll crack the strongest nerves," they told her, boasting of their conquests. "Nothing can stop us now."

She smiled and sauntered on. She was dazzled and blinded with Faith. The *Landsers* were winning, the bulletins claimed, and nothing could alter that fact.

She was not alone in her Faith. An ancient neighbor widow listened by the window, her face a mask, her jaw on fire. And here is what she heard:

*"Die Fahne hoch.*
*Die Reihen fest geschlossen,*
*SA marschiert mit ruhig festem Schritt—"*

She had loved a man; he was gone. She had borne him five sons; all five had been shot. Her martyrs, as vivid as ever! Now songs gave their sacrfice meaning.

*"Kam'raden, die Rotfront*
*und Reaktion erschossen,*
*marchiern im Geist*
*in unsren Reihen mit."*

She had barely prevailed on the saddest soil in the world; she had never had songs of her own; her past was too merciless, her struggle too constant. Before the Führer's *Landsers* came like apparitions, commissioned to make order out of chaos and cause the earth to tremble with their wrath, there had been the crackle of shots in the orchards. Whole generations, martyred, whose only crime had been that they were German people, that they had sown the wheat! How could that be a crime?

Now she heard songs instead of guns, and how they fit! How deeply meaningful that was! The Führer's songs were rich and deep and throbbing with emotion. She kept tapping her foot; she kept cupping her ear to hear better.

*"—viele Jahre zogen dahin,*
*the Völker geknechtet, betrogen—"*
*"Verräter und Juden hatten Gewinn,*
*sie forderten Opfer Millionen—"*

This much she knew: Those songs bestowed justice to victims.

Once she had been among her country's richest people—but with her last son shot, not even a funeral service to bless his last remains! Not even a crude casket! She dabbed her eyes in memory.

She, too, believed: the Führer was the bulwark, his guns

trained on the Fiend. He was a leader called upon by God to exercise his powers. He reached out day by day—not for the pocketbooks, but for the hearts of kin.

She gave him hers, and gladly.

For he took mayhem and wrought stillness. He brought calm to the tormented land. He held at bay the hideous Beast, the pockmarked, webbed monstrosity, holed up inside the Kremlin, surrounded by the ghosts of those it had maliciously destroyed.

She knew that punishment was due. She didn't even blink.

"Now there can be no turning back," this widow summed up who, only by a miracle, had managed to survive. She knew of no parallel case wherein both vice and virtue were as clearly, as sharply outlined. The hated tormenters of innocents, the ruthless profiteers of a corrupt regime were being executed now in Russia's market squares, and that was fine with her.

As far as she could see, the lion-hearted came to set the anguished free. Her trust in him was absolute. Across the beaten land, there waved the Mystic Cross.

She watched how pacifists, once more clad in Biblical attire, threw flowers in the Führer's path, for he was David, taking on Goliath.

She, too, had claims on history.

She was sprung from an extraordinary family that traced its roots into the Prussian swamps, centuries before they settled in the plains to worship, sow and reap. Here they had lived for many generations—all ages under one gigantic roof, all multiplying and obeying, a peaceful creed, a thorough breed that wanted nothing more, and nothing less, than to be strong and free and numerous in kin so as to garner yet another harvest—and, in the process, feed a hungry world.

But then the hoodlums came and ran their bayonets into the ancient Faith. Crimes of that magnitude should never go unpunished! So let the torturers and traitors mount the planks for once to face the lawful noose!

Her shoulders shook with shudders, but she did not back off.

Now black was black again, and white was white, floating in

rivers of red, and everything was orderly and neatly sorted out. Now it was once again the age-old maxim bred into her every gene, and that was: Race and Space. Now it was *Lebensraum.*

*"Im Volke geboren erstand uns ein Führer,*
*gab Glauben und Hoffnung*
*an Deutschland uns wieder—*
*Volk ans Gewehr! Volk ans Gewehr!"*

Those words of sorcery and spell roared in her wobbling head, endorsed and sanctioned by the Army of the Lord that spoke His very language. The Wehrmacht made right what was wrong; its drums stopped the nightmare of terror and fear; they flushed out Jewish Bolsheviks and partisans from the bushes.

A winter came and went. The days grew long and lush. The goose paths were brimming with children, small swastikas clutched in their fists. The lilies broke their buds; they bloomed as they had never bloomed before in living memory. The stars streamed velvet silver. A nightingale called plaintively in the acacia trees, as if to burst its throat.

Out came the plows, yokes, harnesses and hand tools so that the seed could mingle with the loam. The earth glistened freshly with dew. Spring rain fell on the trees and seeped into the soil, softening the acres.

The German plow cut furrow after furrow.

Wheat came first. Next came oats. Barley followed. The stalks stood tall and firm. The crops were free of weeds. The homesteads were hives of activity. The Russian field hands labored earnestly and energetically, their eyes bright with their gratitude. Meat was now served four times a week; the foreman dealt bread in large chunks. The women added meat and salt. The workers didn't notice they were tired until the sunset drove them home, where supper was already waiting.

Say what you will: it was a wondrous time.

Marleen cast every woe aside. "Roll up your sleeves, now!" was her cry. And meanwhile—scrubbing on the washboard until the laundry squeaked with cleanliness! And muscle and self-

discipline until both hands were covered with huge blisters!

She and her neighbors dreamed of improving piggeries and of scientific poultry farming. The apples were already ripening. The fields were bursting with strong crops. The streets outside were swept with reeds. The grateful field hands leveled the potatoes.

At night, when all the work was done, out came the folding chairs to watch the *Landsers* in formation, to do precision marches, battalions in amazing numbers, like a tempestuous flood.

And if the Mystic Cross spiked through the grass to look for hidden treachery—and with the help of sputtering machine gun blasts kept smoking evil out of hiding—why, that was now the order of the day.

"All this, so you will never have to fear the shadows in the orchards," said Mimi to her daughter, who was the luckiest girl alive, for the Führer had singled her out.

For it was duty now in absolutely everything. Not even pumpkin heads would dare to disobey. You had to march on orders, camp on orders, work on orders, sleep on orders, if need be die on orders, although she, Erika, was still a little girl not even four feet tall.

That's why, when duty overwhelmed her—for she was far from perfect!—she hid in Baba's shed so she could drift and dream.

Beneath Natasha's stairwells was a niche; that's where she kept her icons and various things she stole—foodstuff and discard clothing, wrapped in old paper bags. Natasha bared her head each time she passed that hidden niche.

One afternoon, when no one looked—with Marleen trying yet another recipe, Mimi rolling Red Cross bandages and Baba being elsewhere—she crawled inside. It was as good a hiding place as any. She was just starting to enjoy herself, indulging in fly-away thoughts, when Natasha came running and panting.

"Out! I said out! What are you doing there, my God!"

Yes, her old Baba, even she! The moment she discovered

Erika, curled up and hiding in her safety spot, she grabbed her by her heels and dragged her out of musty zones composed of fleeting images right back into the glaring sunshine, and then she gasped twice and sat down.

"What? Have you lost your senses? You scared me half to death!" A single tear was dropping off Natasha's crumpled nose.

All that was mystifying. It made for small, sharp jolts. First standing on one leg, then shifting to the other, the youngster tried to rub herself against the servant like a small and hungry cat that needed to be petted, but Baba had a jittery expression on her face and did not notice anything.

Natasha, too, had changed. She, too, was taking reverence to extremes. She kept on talking to herself; she kept on swiveling her head as though she were a weather vane, and always out of breath.

That day, when she could speak again, she said: "Don't ever crawl in there again! It's full of spider webs." She looked as though she were near tears. Whenever Baba talked like that and looked like that, she, Erika, was close to tears as well; her throat was constricted with loss.

"What is the matter, Baba? Why are you always sad?"

"Who's sad? What? Are you crazy, honey child? I'm happy with my bread and onions," lied Natasha.

"But I was only—"

"Shhh! Put your arms around my neck."

Together they sat, listening. The noise outside was deafening as the Wehrmacht rolled over the steppe; all soldiers, ready for assault, all streaming in the same direction. The youngster and the Russian servant tried to shield themselves against the onslaught of the sounds of war, the rattle and bumping and jolting of wheel after wheel, steel upon steel, as the Führer was riding the tiger.

When rumors about widespread, violent pogroms reached the folks of Apanlee, few people bothered to take notice.

Pogroms were nothing new—the bearded anarchists of yes-

terday who carried bombs to rip the tsars apart all had a rabbi hidden somewhere in their past. Here was another one.

The Hebrews, it was widely understood, had been the ones who had deposed and killed the Romanovs, and that's how everything began. That's why the execution pits filled up as they ousted the Crown and grabbed hold of the hammer and sickle.

That's when the German martyrs started falling.

And then, the steppe a vast graveyard.

And then, no end to terror, grief and tears.

For two decades, death sat in the napes of their necks; the parasites bared fangs and teeth; grief fell on good and bad alike and brought them to their doom; and all they had to lay their aching hearts against were dark and moldy graves, too numerous to count.

"Away with treachery!" the Führer shouted now. "Away with Exploiters! Scum! Riffraff! Slime! Ragtag and rabble! Who sucked the life out of the marrow of your bones and wrecked the roofs that generations built?"

There was no need to point them out. There was nothing redeeming about them. The reckoning was imminent, expected to be rough. The silent faces, now altogether dry of tears, had something in their eyes that looked like sharded glass.

# Chapter 98

All youngsters lived to honor Fatherland and Führer, and, therefore, Erika did, too, but when the teacher told her, knuckling her to speed her transformation: "Don't dawdle! It's your turn!", it was a jolt each time. When duty called and all her classmates followed cheerfully, it always felt to her as though somebody turned a garden hose full blast upon a dog.

As soon as she was old enough to join the League of German Girls, the female counterpart to the respected all-male Hitler Youth, Erika discovered to her shame: she was a dreadful coward.

Everybody hated cowards, and she was one of them. In fact, she was the worst. She owed the Führer everything. In fair exchange, he owned her and expected things of her. She did not want to be the ruin of Germany.

That's why she slunk away to hide herself and dream, more times than she was willing to admit, heart pounding in her chest.

As far back as she could remember, she knew that she was odd. While others shone with purpose and self-discipline, she moved among the shadows. Words were her specialty. She wrote

them on all kinds of snippets and hid them in her pocket. Nobody knew her secret: as soon as she found yet another word to make sense out of yet another puzzle, her nature was no longer warped. No one ever said that she was taking after Mimi, who stood beneath the Führer's flags still hanging from the trees, while sucking in her stomach.

She, Erika, was different. She knew exactly how. She managed to disgrace herself in countless silly ways. She kept on bumping into walls and knocking over flower pots, and only yesterday tripped over Baba's milking stool and sent the bucket flying. If she walked accidentally beneath an apple tree, an apple fell smack on her head. If she passed by a rosebush, it scarred her on her ear. She lost a heel off a brand new shoe, and that gave her a limp. She tried to skate and broke an ankle; it took her months to heal. She tried to help Natasha slice an onion, but only cut into her thumb. Her stomach kept rumbling and wouldn't stop rumbling when respectable visitors came. At dinner, invited to show her best manners, she dragged her sleeve through the gravy.

No wonder she became a nervous, high-strung female. She had strange thoughts and wild beliefs. She falsely thought she might become somebody's valentine if she tried hard enough—until she took a long, hard look in Mimi's mirror. At that, her mind went blank and stayed that way until she had a chance to slink away, excused.

This happened on the day Marleen put her upon a chair, tied one end of a strong darning thread around her tooth, the other to the ceiling hook, then urged her to jump down.

She tried, but botched the job. They had to yank that tooth by holding her supine, which was no picnic either. She bawled and couldn't stop. Now she was twice as old as she was then, but nothing much had changed. Another tooth had since grown in, but not as strong as needed; it was already wobbling. She probed it with her tongue.

It seemed that, at all time, her tears were near the spilling point. Nail-biting was the only weapon that she knew. She knew

that she was odd—that was the crux of the matter.

Born in the darkest year, the bleakest year, that saw men turn to beasts and beasts turn into skeletons, she knew she was lucky beyond words to have been born at all.

It took her mother weeks to even choose her name, so utterly devoid of all emotions had Mimi been when she gave birth, a story in itself. It took forever to give birth, claimed Mimi every time she told the tale, distraught at the mere memory.

The child was stubborn and recalcitrant; it clung to her womb as though to a lifeline, just wouldn't let go and be born. Mimi, who loved drama, embroidering this tale, would always claim that she felt split right down the center; there seemed no end to labor. The very day it happened, the boots had kicked against the door, and she had had to watch her husband being led away to perish in the snow.

It had been such a poor exchange—a baby for a husband!

As the years wore on, Mimi's words grew ever more dramatic regarding that traumatic day, but deep inside she knew, and so did Erika, that Mimi was incapable of drawing her small, bony daughter through the armoured meshes of her feelings, so desperate had she been to hold herself together as all the world around her flew apart—as she had fiercely struggled, days on end, if you believed her story, to give new life amidst the violence of the German purges of the Thirties that swept the length of Soviet Russia.

When all was said and done, she had a pile of bloody sheets; she had no husband any more; he probably was dead; at least as good as dead. She was left stuck with a small daughter, if you could call it that, a mottled thing with spindly limbs, contracting lockjaw constantly, refusing to be fed.

Despite her clumsy feet and awkward hands, Erika became the first of many gifted youngsters in the vicinity of Apanlee to be selected for dispatch to help the Fatherland speed up the long-awaited victory. She would not be the last.

When she was told that she would have to leave in a year's time, perhaps not ever to return, not ever to see Apanlee again, she sat in a stupefied silence. Her life went limp with sadness. She knew she was no angel, but on the other hand, who was? At Apanlee, all kinds of folks were coming, going, stepping over her; few knowing, much less caring, that she had an important birthday coming up.

She was eleven still, but soon she would be twelve—too old to rub herself against Natasha in hopes she'd drop whatever she was doing and offer up her lap.

She marshaled Faith to serve as antidote.

Marleen's old Bible, once again in full display upon the shelf of honor, described it cleverly, this thing called Faith, all similes and metaphors. The Bible claimed Faith was a living thing that grew until it moved a mountain—but while she waited for that miracle to manifest, she longed to slink out silently and shamed and hide herself away.

Cowardice. The word was out, and it was cowardice.

She woke with it, and slept with it. Cowardice was like an itchy undergarment; you couldn't even scratch. In self-defense, she longed to curl herself into as small a coil as possible, so she could dream a bit.

Her dreams were fragile as blisters. They rose from deep within. The moment that she found herself alone, her mind commenced to drift as though it were a Zeppelin, but that did not change facts: she was dispensible.

"Find things to do. Find things to do," her mother always chided her when she was underfoot. "Now run along. Go help Natasha in the kitchen. I smell potatoes frying."

That was the chorus now at Apanlee to cure her of her blight. Find things to do! Make yourself useful now!

She did not shun her chores. She tried her best to do them all with cheer. She tried with all her might, for that was in her nature. She didn't give up easily. She was a law-and-order person, too; in fact, she was the best.

She did as she was taught to do; she folded blankets, set out dishes; she started breakfast fires by whittling kindling wood to gladden Baba's heart. She followed the cackle of chickens and hunted for eggs in the shrubs. She swept the entrance clean so that the gravel flew. She worked as hard as anyone she knew.

No matter what she did, there was still more to do!

She pulled potatoes from the soil until she nearly dropped, but when the day was over, she was glad. By then, her feet were cold as ice; her stomach was in knots; her heart kept knocking hard against her ribs; her gaze was out of focus. At night, she burrowed in her pillows, suffused with yearning to find out what lay behind it all.

She did not know why her small heart cramped to the message of the Führer, when everybody else's opened wide with Faith and love and certainty. Anxiety was always at her ankles, nipping. She knew that she lacked bravery and was convinced she was as wicked as red trousers—which was one reason, verily! why she would soon be asked to leave the only place she knew, the only faces that she knew, maybe not ever to return.

Once, when she tried to rub herself against Marleen, who happened to be busy, Marleen said absentmindedly: "I'll let you stir the batter."

She rubbed her head against Natasha's apron until Natasha had no choice, bent down and told her, sighing: "All right. I'll take a break. Now put your little arms around my neck. But only for two minutes."

Natasha now was busy canning apples by the bushels, determined not to let the flies spoil any. Mimi, of late, had joined the Songster Club and was now busy day and night with her own sundry duties, now that she had become a Red Cross helper in addition, one of her many curious traits.

"Can't I just come along and watch you?"

"Next week, perhaps," said Mimi, and let the matter drop, but not before she gave her daughter a small shove in the direction of the door. She had no time at all for Erika, whose back was

thin and bony, whose muscles kept cramping on the trapeze.

And backward somersaults? *Ach Gott! Du liebe Güte!*

Backward somersaults were murder. Long distance running was the pits. When others fell into a sharp and even trot and kept it up, no matter what the weather, she had to stop repeatedly; her socks kept sliding down.

In summary, it was an anxious time.

One major, tragic flaw of Erika's was this: she was too delicate. She was like a tropical garden. It took a lot of fuss to hold herself together.

Another was that both her brows arched oddly, and people gave her looks. Natasha said she didn't mind, but even she was adding to the chorus: "Think hard now. Aren't you a grown-up girl? You have been picked for leadership. We have to do what's right because it's right, and not because it's easy."

Well, easier said than done for Erika, who did not think herself exceptional at all in qualities the Führer needed in a leader. The Führer wanted youngfolk taut; he wanted lucid lives; he disdained secrecy. By contrast, she relied on secrecy. She kept that special box, tied with a knotted ribbon, deep in a bottom drawer. When asked what was inside that box, she stood on one leg first, then shifted to the other. Admitting it was poetry was asking her to die.

To fit herself into the fervor of the times, she wrote neat poems to the Führer. Poems were a mania with her. She lived with cadences.

"—and on his mind,

the only thing that matters:

The greatness that is Germany—"

she wrote, and talent must have been involved, for when she worked up every ounce of courage and read them out aloud, why, even Baba ahhed.

In windy weather she would plead: "Can't I stay home today?" to which her mother frowned. Young children made her

baffled and confused.

"Stay home? Whatever for? Where is your gratitude? What will the Führer say?"

"Why must I exercise?"

"Because it's good for you," said Mimi, who looked as though she wished with all her heart to mother properly, but motherhood was something she had shelved until the war was won, which could be any day. "Stop whining now. You know you can excel in anything if that's what you decide. Just put your mind to it."

"I earned eight stars already."

"Let's see your fingernails—"

Nail-biting was another habit all grownups thoroughly despised, particularly Mimi. She hid her hands behind her back and fell into a stutter. A hanging cuticle burned like a tiny flame. She longed to pull it off.

She wasn't needed, wanted or appreciated anywhere. This was a thought so overwhelming that it seemed pitiful she could not bite that nail down to the quick to get a morsel of relief. To be sent off to help the Führer win the war, all by herself, with nothing but her Faith, an iffy thing in any case—that's when she started nibbling.

"This hurts me more than you," decided Mimi, like parents everywhere, and broke herself a switch.

A vexing child. A nervous, anxious youngster. A constant irritant, courting grief no matter what she did—these were the reasons Mimi finally agreed with school authorities: the task at hand was more maturity, which could be reaped in Germany. And that's why Mimi, who wore the garb of patriot with pride, told Erika, not having any other choice: "I don't know how to tell you this, but you've been singled out."

"For what?"

"To go to Germany for proper grooming. Few youngsters are as lucky. That's what I think. What do you think?"

What did she think? Not much.

Her teacher, too.

"Selection is the greatest honor," the teacher explained in the heartiest voice. "Who's going? You and you and you. Now, everybody cheer!"

"When?"

"Soon."

No date as yet. But soon.

It was a painful time for Erika. She knew that she was not deserving; selection happened by a fluke of luck.

"Don't stare out of the window, Erika. Instead, why don't you give me four good reasons why it right and good to go to Germany?"

"Because it's good for me. Because it is an honor."

"Yes?"

"Because it strengthens character."

"That's right. That is point three. What is point four?"

The color seeped into her temples. The teacher, turning to the class, announced: "I told you Erika was stubborn."

"I can't remember," faltered Erika, confronted with cool faces.

No one expected full perfection, but near-perfection was the goal. Pennants and badges, ribbons and medals—that's how you could tell someone's worth. The road to that was sacrifice, and that's where she fell short. The Führer counted on obedience and duty, and that's what she was lacking. When she had sentry duty, she promptly fell asleep. Her classmates did not miss a single target drill; she found those maddening excuses.

"A bad pain in the neck! A sharp stab in the side," whimpered Erika, invisible to critters big and small except when she was sick.

Next followed several arguments that she already knew.

"You're dying? Is that it?" The teacher gave her a withering glance.

"Aim carefully," the teacher said and pinned another target to a post.

A classmate hissed from both his nostrils: "See how I do it, Erika?"

She did not want to practice target-shoots, not even with an

airgun dummy. With flying hands, she checked the angle of the fire. The backlash knocked her to her knees. Her stomach turned peculiar. Her palms were damp with perspiration. The blood rushed to her head.

She longed to hide herself away so she could dream in solitude. In company, her specialties were fidgeting and twitching.

"At least put something solid in your stomach, Erika," coaxed Baba while doing the finishing touches around the supper table. "Don't pick around your food. Just try to grow some muscle."

She kept ladling her soup. She kept slurping her black ersatz coffee.

A healthy body and a strong, hard will were necessary attributes to help the Führer win. She did not have a body to make the Führer proud, and she decidedly lacked will. She was a quiet, introspective child, but useless in the ways that knowing people valued.

She couldn' even swim across the waterhole of Apanlee—not that she didn't try. No one tried as hard as Erika, and few tried harder with less luck.

One merry morning, for example, just as the leaves were turning red, she mustered every ounce of courage and started out with flailing limbs and bursting lungs while making for the other side, but all too soon, she found herself in an emergency, her eyes just bulging in her skull—it was awful!

Had not Natasha been nearby, busy cutting fodder for the cow, she would have been in dreadful trouble; she would have drowned herself.

"Help! Help!" shrieked Erika, and luckily Natasha fished her out with shouts of terror and the handle of a rake, and even after both sat down and found their breaths, their legs kept quivering.

"What? Have you lost your mind? Why do a stupid thing like that?" Natasha scolded finally, when she could speak again.

"I don't know why," gagged Erika.

Natasha's skin hung loose around her face. She looked like

an old, saddened frog. "Don't give me that. So talk. Speak up. Tell your old Baba, honey."

"You wouldn't understand."

She hunched at Baba's feet. She longed to slip into her arms as though into a down comforter, but even Baba had caught on and shared the spirit of the times in her attempts to clean the world of imperfection. She fussed and grumbled over puddles on the floor she, Erika, left sloppily when she came in from exercises in the fields after a sudden rain.

"I'm just so scared. So scared." Her breath felt raw and ragged. She was so exhausted from striving for perfection she could barely endure it, but she pushed herself on, resolutely. "There's no way out. Oh, Baba."

"You're hand-picked. That should count for something," consoled Natasha lamely, and thereby let her know she, Erika, was not in line for miracles the icons might have granted.

"I'm scared as well," said Baba very softly.

That didn't help a bit. She started hiccuping. She hiccuped at the slightest provocation, and hiccoughs only brought out sneezing. She inched a little closer until her head was in Natasha's lap to let Natasha check. She pointed to her scalp. "There's something itching. Here. Behind the ear."

This, too, was a pretense. She knew that she was squeaky clean; she had no lice, unlike in the olden days when no one had the time to scrub her down and she was left alone for weeks on end because all humankind she knew was forced to slave from dawn to dusk to fill another quota that Dominik dreamed up.

That, too, had changed, and for the better. Now that the Führer was in charge, all children were as clean as though scrubbed with a wire brush, but habit was habit; Natasha made sure. Her old, arthritic hands were soothing.

"Stop worrying. Will you stop worrying? I'll have a talk with Mimi."

That was one avenue already tried in vain. Other children had parents—a mother, for instance, who wore an apron and a bun—but Mimi, ill-equipped for domesticity, just preened her-

self before her mirror, admiring her profile from every conceivable angle and lavishing caressing looks on Jonathan.

"We must abstain from selfish thoughts so that the future can begin. Here, have a glass of water. And stop hiccuping! There is nothing, at this point, to add."

It was a tiresome refrain. She yearned to be like everybody else. She knew that she was not.

# Chapter 99

"What Holocaust?" asks Mimi, a depleted and toothless survivor, facing Archibald, who taunts her endlessly.

"You ask?"

"The Germans knew of genocide of their own kin, decades before the word was coined by Hollywood."

That's Mimi, at her feeblest. An ancient veteran of a war she still sees belching out of Hollywood in grotesque shadow plays, she can't let go of it; she claims she knows who started it; she argues with a trembling chin: "What do you people know, snug in your feather quilts? For us, between the two great wars, the Holocaust was real. It was directed against us. It was planned terror, base and raw."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"It was the Jewish architects," she says, "who carried Bolshevism in their blood as lice will carry typhus."

She speaks against his guffaws. "We never heard of it. Where is the evidence?"

"If you want evidence," she says, "just read the Protocols."

At that, the relatives reply in unison: "What Protocols? We

never heard the word."

"How do the Führer's actions weigh," she wants to know with quivers in her voice, tucked deep in Little Melly's pillows to give her spine some warmth, "against that sea of blood that washed away whole generations of our kind? Whole generations! Listen! Good, honest people, whose only so-called 'crime' had been that they had listened to the earth? That they had coaxed the grain the world still eats today? Their crime? That they were Germans? Is that it?"

"Your Führer tried to gobble up the world."

"Against the background of so many ashen years?"

She sits, surrounded by a dozen cousins born after the Korean War, who all stare at her, blankly. Their eyes accuse. They shrink away from her. "Your Führer killed the Jews. Did he not kill six million Jews?"

"Let history decide. But only after it has looked at all the facts."

But sadly, no one listens, and she shrinks back into the doilies and the cushions that still are Little Melly's legacy, and soon she says no more.

"I am too old. It's up to you," said Mimi recently to Erika, who still sees things with her third eye, thanks to her artistry. These days, wherever Erika stops for a night while gleaning history out of the driftage of half a century ago, the air is thick with talk about the Jews and their sinister role in the wars. As she amasses evidence to clear the cobwebs from her thoughts, she hears about the need to clean up royally among the traitors and connivers.

This, too, is ancient fare.

She still remembers clearly. The Führer said: "The Lodges." He said: "The Protocols."

She knows her mother's Führer was the first to utter the forbidden words. She knows, but does not tell. Where are the words to summarize what happened to her family because the Führer came—at zero hour, literally!—and shouted to the approbation

of the bludgeoned millions upon millions: "We must throw off the yoke!" ?

He said. "We must explode the bondage!"

He said: "It's duty now, and nothing else has worth."

He said: "It's us or they. We cannot co-exist."

When Erika was small, the Führer seized the steppe with that thought. The people learned that certain potent words—Freemasons, Bolsheviks, and Jews—were words they could use interchangeably. The Führer spoke of things that many vaguely sensed and many now saw verified. And could it be mere chance, the Führer asked repeatedly, that many carried precious metals in their names? Why, gold bugs! Silver beetles! All!

The Führer's mandate moved into a vacuum just aching to be filled. Here's what the Führer did the moment Jonathan arrived at Apanlee: He was sending the Antichrist reeling.

His panzers kept on mulching acre after acre while Hitler Youth swarmed everywhere, shoes tied around their necks. The people threw their windows open to let the clean air in.

The Führer picked the facts and set them down for people to consider: The Jews were leeches on the body of the universe. The mastermind behind the bloodshed of the previous decades stood finally revealed.

The Jews of yesterday, it was disclosed that year, did not cut glass and tailor pants and sharpen people's knives and scissors—all that was flimflam and bamboozle. Subversion was the key to every single move.

The loot sat in their cellars.

Inside their synagogues, usurers were systematically trained.

Most Jews were sly beyond belief. Not one of them could look you in the eye. No country gave them visas.

You could not pry their secrets out of them.

If left unchecked, they took more than your jewelry and your watches. They stole your ethnic pride. And why? Because you loved your kin; because you valued racial pride, was that enough to ship you to the dungeons of Siberia?

The evidence grew thick. The Mystic Cross commandos came to disinfect the cottages. The cleansing had begun. The Hebrews scrubbed the lavatories with their prayer shawls. The Führer's soldiers trampled on the Talmud.

Few doubted the consistent message, for it had grooves as old as history. It was a well-mapped road. The bulletins that crackled softly from the radio informed of additional meshes of treason.

The argument was simple and grew ever more persuasive: If you had a thorn in the sole of your foot, did you keep it, accepting the pain?

Of course not! That would have been foolish!

You pried that thorn out of your flesh. Survival of a culture was at stake. Fit punishment was for the Führer to decide.

All this the peaceful people knew, and what they didn't know, the death squads rounded out. This was a brutal war; the Führer's*Einsatztruppen* went to work and started shooting people.

It has been more than fifty years. In Mennotown today, it is a daring man who will speak up when government officials come to rifle through old documents in unctuous ways so they can hang old men in Israel to pacify the Jews.

So. There, as here.

And then as now.

It's true.

More dogs and guards arrived. The Jews hid in the bushes, and not without good cause.

This was the sentiment. The Hebrews were perceived by old and young alike to be the cancer of the world. But once the enemy was slain, there would be peace again, not only here at Apanlee where, by Advent, rejoicing people pinched their hams, but north to south and east to west. Peace. Safety. And prosperity.

Horizon to silver horizon.

When special death squads passed through Apanlee and pinned down everybody with their questions: "Where are the skull caps and yarmulkes?" Marleen looked up from her full darning basket, as ever within reach, and said:

"Who? What? Whatever do you mean?"

"Your kin was like a forest. Where are they now? You know whom you must thank for all the murders of your kin."

A tear fell on the sock she knit for Jonathan. She felt her face grow hot. The minutes ticked by slowly.

Two were still left. Her daughter, Mimi. And Mimi's daughter, Erika.

The rest were dead and gone. Her husband, Hein. The twins. Her poor, beheaded babies.

The crippled Uncle Benny and his slim sunshine, Dorothy.

Her countless aunts and uncles. Her cousins—one by one.

She stood aside as death squads went to work in the Ukraine as though a fleet were steaming out to sea. The German soldiers who had come and taken over Apanlee to universal jubilee—this without firing one small shot!—now started filling up the execution pits with tormenters and traitors.

Natasha's icons stared.

Thus was the past peeled off, the future ushered in. The burial mounds that held the past of Apanlee sank deep into the earth. The future had a name again, and it was called the Führer.

Now it was good and bad in deadly rivalry, and good was winning out. Inch by inch and trench by trench, the Wehrmacht was winning the struggle. The steppe was afloat with tanks and anti-aircraft guns, half-trucks, jeeps, armored cars and motorcycles. The radio told of bloody battles. Victorious flags from Stalingrad to Minsk!

The radio crackled softly with the consistent message. The church bells rang. The sidewalks, harrowed crosswise, filled up with eager youngsters, as new, blond, blue-eyed life arose out of the wreckage of the old.

A premium for every newborn child!

Above the hem, embroidery!

In the tumultuous east, the cannons kept on thundering to finish off the Fiend, but here at Apanlee, the lights kept gleaming brightly.

This, too, is history, not taught to anyone.

The forces of the Fatherland triumphed on every front, and what they swept away from Apanlee was terror. From fence to fence, the grateful people knew: a rightful gentry was restored. The smell of disinfectant wafted through the homesteads. The clouds had the scent of clean laundry.

Once again, there was fruit to be given away. There were bushels of turnips. And beets. And potatoes. It was a living thing again, that soil they loved so deeply, that had been so abused for many bitter years.

And best of all, a petrified religion sprang to life and started blooming richly. The martyred people said: "Let us take off our shoes. We are on holy ground."

Natasha kept mopping her forehead in silence.

As often as her chores allowed, she took herself to church, where she sat, pondering the fate of Dominik, who was still hiding out. Her swollen eyes were on her priest who blessed the armies of the Führer.

"Christ has risen! Christ has risen!" the priest was chanting fervently, while incense swirled about him. The priest held his icons aloft while the faithful kept shouting for Jesus.

"Where is he? Where is he hiding out?" they shouted.

Natasha hunched with shame, like some black beetle, while mockery and scorn flared all around her. She shook her head. She bit her lips. Her Dominik was still her son. He never was her favorite; he had his faults—but on the other hand, he tried to meet the Five Year Plan in four. He plied himself with drinks and wicked friends and grew an itching spirit.

All that, she knew. She didn't argue facts. But even she could see that it was not his fault alone—he acted under someone else's orders. Whose orders? That's where her questions stopped.

How could an old, gnarled nursemaid know who'd goaded Dominik to slash and burn and kill? She couldn't tell. She didn't have a clue. But this she knew with certainty: for Dominik, nobody cried a tear.

A gray and clammy film spread through the niches of her heart as she sat, listening. The faithful chanted loudly, their voices rising to the ceiling: "Where is he hiding out?"

The old oak creaked and moaned; she listened and her heart beat faster to the sound. The priest went outside, swinging incense, as he had done in olden days before the Revolution came and drove him underground.

Now he was back, and nothing much had changed. She watched him chant, smoke swirling all around him, as he advised the congregation mournfully: "—and nowhere can the Savior Jesus Christ be found."

"He has risen!" came the chorus. "He's safe. Oh! He has risen! He has risen!"

"Indeed! Indeed! He has risen indeed," Natasha joined the chant, her old glance in her lap.

That was the year when life turned lush for Mimi.

It was a sensuous thing, a deeply satisfying thing, this matter of Faith in the Führer and love for the man of her dreams. For she loved Jonathan.

Before the Wehrmacht came, she, too, had married and conceived, for that was what you did in haste in the grueling Stalinist years. If a girl wanted love—and she did! —she better be fast and not choosy.

So Mimi, too. She, too, had grabbed a man and married him before somebody came and said: "Come with us. Walk or die!"

Everything about her young, unlucky husband became a hazy blur. She could scarcely remember his voice. By now, no doubt, the tundra was bleaching his bones, though his features survived in the child.

Now she had Erika. Now it was motherhood, and that was difficult.

She had no frame of reference, for nothing ever had belonged to Mimi to do with as she wished. As far back as she could remember, all thoughts, all things, all living flesh belonged to Comrade Stalin, to sate his fiendish mood.

Love, even for a daughter as gifted as her own, was a decided luxury. If you attached yourself to luxury, tomorrow it was gone.

She often stared at Erika, confounded in her soul. She found her overwhelming.

When Jonathan arrived at Apanlee and fell in love with Mimi, she learned that she no longer had to measure up to two opposing ideologies. She could have both. A family. And Faith.

She drank Faith straight, and on an empty stomach.

She took Faith hungrily from Jonathan's hard lips that tasted of summer and hay. She loved him utterly.

He was as fearsome as a tiger, yet gentle as a dove. His idol was the Führer; soon, he was hers as well. As far as she could see, the Führer won hands down. He was Christ walking on the waters. His *Landsers* filled the steppe, end to end, with certainty and trust.

She kicked aside the last rung of the Christian Faith that had sustained her kin for centuries and never once looked back.

Instead, she looked around and saw that all was orderly and calculated to the tiniest dot, as a fresh vigor rose, proficient and triumphant, from ashen days and brutal nights.

The mail came each morning at nine. It was carried in fat, bulging pouches, and with it came instructions.

Pink for perverts.

For Jews, a yellow triangle.

For Gypsies, a brown triangle.

Life wasn't any worse for having certain rules. She threw her all into the new equation, this long before the Indian summer gathered clouds. She was famished for order, for love and romance. Her body was throbbing with longing; the Führer's promises were as restorative as freshly brewed coffee with cream.

In fair exchange, she longed to help the Führer. She was

often too tired to eat, but never too tired to help.

"Whatever must be done, I'll do," said Mimi, and helped the cook who ordered sugar by the bucket and flour by the sackload to stock the gulash cannons.

She helped unload the wounded soldiers who came to Apanlee in intermittent batches, who all went home to Germany to heal and to return—but not before she made sure that they had a hot bowl of Marleen's tasty chicken soup to steel them for the journey.

Outside, the wind blew hard. The Wehrmacht fought at Stalingrad. The flames kept licking around logs. The Führer promised once again he would restore the world to peace, prosperity and plenty.

The Führer had no choice but to start weeding out the Jews, said Jonathan as well, explaining every question mark: "Karl Marx? Descended on both sides from a long line of rabbis."

As a result: The ghostly columns, their design. The dungeons, of their making.

She fiddled with the radio. She knew he spoke for everyone. "Around here, no one liked them much. Nobody ever thought that they were pleasant people."

All that was ancient fare. The stories about rabbis and their treacheries went back for generations. No ruler ever liked the Jews. No monarch ever trusted them.

"We cannot co-exist," said Jonathan.

She listened silently. She measured the life she had traveled and was content with what the *Landsers* brought when they arrived at Apanlee. She felt no need to hate, but neither did she feel averse to what he clarified for her. She nodded sleepily. A hard day lay behind her, a harder day was still to come, but there was safety now. No fear. No famine. And no purges.

She fit herself into his arms as tightly as she could. "You're right. We cannot co-exist."

She had been born to blood and nursed on blood and walked in blood as long as she remembered. A quarter century had come

and gone before she even realized there lay a world outside the gates of Apanlee where Satan wasn't feasting on the marrow of her kin. Now everything made sense. Now, finally, the shoe was on the other foot, which was where it belonged.

Now deep and dreamless sleep came over her at night. Stalin's henchmen weren't swarming Apanlee like bedbugs—taunting, biting and tormenting.

She felt no contradiction. The power of the Ten Commandments was in force. The poorest peasant had a pig again to spoil as if it were a child. A farmer was again the master of his soil, allowed to grow enough to feed his cattle and his horses, and no one came to confiscate the harvest he had coaxed with diligence and honesty out of the willing soil. It all made sense to Mimi. She wasn't raised to hate. But neither was she raised to maudlin charity. Why should she pity them—the Jews? They had not pitied Yuri.

Now it was reaping time: they reaped what they had sowed. If you sowed oats, you did not harvest barley.

It all had happened before. No doubt it would happen again. It was sad, but the Hebrews had never been part of her world until the Revolution came, replacing plows with bayonets.

There was nothing that she could have added.

Not so with Jonathan. Bloodlines had meaning for him; he couldn't let go; he was haunted.

To reassure himself, he took a week to trace his ancestry. For hours, Jonathan hunched over brittle, yellow charts and mildewed documents, while outside the ambulances, baggage cars, horses, wagons and field kitchens kept on streaming by.

"I had a hundred cousins once," he said to Mimi, who never left his side. "Where are they now?"

She smiled and teased him gently. "There's one right here, and sitting next to you."

"My heart thirsts for revenge," he said, and there was something in the noise the Wehrmacht made that sounded like the angry growling of a river.

"I'll make you some hot tea."

He took her hand. "Am I upsetting you? You are as near and dear to me as though you were my eyes."

"At least drink one glass to the bottom." Her heart—within a bed of flowers. Outside, the wind might howl; within her heart, the lilacs bloomed, petunias nodded everywhere. "Then why not tie the knot?"

He did not even hear.

He was a soldier to his finger tips, obsessed with vengeance and redress, intent on retribution.

# Chapter 100

There was no end of small, heart-broken groups who found their way to Apanlee to catalogue their grievances. They queued up in the halls.

"A wrecker of the Soviet State, that's what they called my grandfather," said one.

"Why such a charge?"

"His crime? They found some hidden grain."

Another spoke of the compelling urge of spring. "My father felt the March wind on his temples and knew that he must sow. They came for him and asked: 'And don't you know, you traitor and you wrecker, that our glorious Soviet Union is entitled to your strength?'"

A third had this to say: "I had seven sons. Now I have none. My children, beasts of burden, earmarked for early death. At point of gun, they took them, one by one."

"—and thus there walked out of my life forever my father, my three brothers—"

"—eight of my uncles and my grandfather, accused of having thieved."

"We took vast, numbing shocks," said the survivors, tears falling freely. "Gone! Gone! All gone! My family is gone!"

"Six of my sons. The winter might have killed them. Wolves might have torn their flesh apart. All our loved ones. Gone."

The accusations flowed. There was no end to them.

Whole generations, learned the *Landsers*, while scribbling, pencils poised, had perished in the swamps and silent forests of Siberia.

"They beat us, one by one," the purging people wept. "We were beaten until we were reeling." They took the soldiers by the sleeves and begged. "Count. Village after village. They beat us with their clubs and whips into the waiting cattle cars to chafe in the quarries of death. Life tossed to all four winds—"

"—worse than the galley slaves of ancient times."

The women from the neighborhood sat weeping on the steps of Apanlee and told the Führer's troops: "Somewhere deep in the wastes of Russia lie our people's graves—"

"—no crosses, stones or markers."

"—and if you pass them on your way to victory, please say a prayer that this heartache be avenged—"

The soldiers' eyes were murky with their thoughts, and you could hear them drawing in their breaths as story after story came revealed.

"Name. Date. And nature of the charge."

"If you were German, that was sufficient cause for exile to Siberia or instant execution."

And now the Führer did what God had never done, despite a hundred thousand pleas dispatched to His heavenly throne: he lent a listening ear. His soldiers replied with the thinnest of smiles: "Will mercy do if it sustains the parasites so they can weaken and torment the strong?"

The weeping people said: "The blood seeped from the dungeons of the Beast."

"The Jewish-Soviet Beast," the Führer's soldiers countered. "And when it smiles—why, it has gold and silver in its teeth."

For years on end, the Lord had watched them being slaughtered for their soil and He had never interfered. Now divine judgment had arrived; the liberating forces stood beneath their snapping flags and smiled; the Führer filled the length and width of the Ukraine with retribution, certainty and trust.

Whole armies moved to do his bidding. Outside, marching soldiers sang their songs about the Fatherland for which they bled and died—all that, while soldiers kept on searching for subversives and guerrillas in the bushes.

The sun kept blazing for a while, but then October came. The wind was tormenting the trees. Natasha built and lit the morning fires, telling Mimi carefully, speaking with a leaden tongue: "Your breakfast's on the stove."

"We'll find the culprits, one by one," said Mimi, confident. "We'll squash them like so many gnats."

Alarm sprang like a tiny flame into Natasha's eyes. She bent to tie a shoelace. She muttered while she fussed and straightened this and that: "I had a frightful dream. Please. Why not spare yourself?"

"We cannot win this war unless the gloves come off."

That night, Natasha walked along the street, her old head swiveling this way and that, just drawing in fresh air.

Meanwhile, the folders thickened. The torches in the fields outside cast darting, dancing shadows. Here was the Mystic Cross, its spikes bent sideways, roaring for revenge and retribution. Who would not have believed? Who would not have agreed?

A widow waited for her turn. She had prepared and memorized all night.

Here's how she testified, tears streaming down her face: "They came for Alexei, my oldest son, and pulled him out of bed and called him an exploiter of the poor. He walked away with them."

The soldiers tried to dry her tears: "When we are finished punishing, there will be no more wars."

She barely heard the litany, so swept was she with sorrow. "Next day, they came for Anatole, my second son. He left with

them. Blows fell on him from every direction—"

"We need details. Do you have any names?"

"My third, whose name was Konstantin, was led away to face the firing squad. The day was dark and rainy—"

The soldiers told this woman: "Speak up and answer freely. Say, who controlled the ink in Russia? Who carved up every thought?"

They asked: "Who drove a stake into your heart and twisted it unceasingly? Who benefited from your pain? Who needed slaves for labor in Siberia to chafe and die like beasts?

The answer, manifest to all. The Jewish canker? Bolshevism. Its aim? It's purpose? Genocide. The wholesale slaughter of all Christians.

Natasha tried to listen like a mouse to what the neighbors said. From a safe distance always, she tried to overhear them. She was a lowly Russian peasant by the stove who had, by then, a chalky look about her nose. They did not watch their voices.

A timid spinster testified: "We owned a hut and a few animals. Therefore, my father was accused of counterrevolution."

The soldiers asked repeatedly: "Who was responsible? A name. That's all we need. A name."

They gave Natasha hooded looks. She trembled by the stove.

"He took the milk the cow produced, the eggs out of the chicken coop—"

"Who's he? That's all we need. A name."

"—he taxed our horses, heifers, chickens, beehives."

"Soon, there was nothing more to take. His goons—"

"—his goons came, and they started shooting!"

"With my own eyes, I inspected the blood-spattered wall."

"We went the length of Apanlee," said many weeping women, "and loaded our dead. We took a ladder, fastened it to chains and hitched a borrowed horse."

It didn't matter that Natasha, by the stove, slumped suddenly and lost her breath.

They said: "He gave the orders. He's the one." The neighbors

formed a circle, holding hands. They spoke with hardened tongues. "He was the worst. That one was game for any cruelty. No man escaped the meshes of his might. A name? We know his name. Behind his name, his signature—a thousand miles of snow."

They also said: "He wore the devil's pentagram while our people, by the thousands, were made to walk on cardboard soles into the icy tomb."

And finally they said: "See that old Baba over there? She gave him life. He was her no-good son."

The people pitied her, but right was right, and wrong was wrong. The chorus grew until it filled the universe: "Where is the lout, Natasha?"

She fought as any mother would have fought. On wooden legs, she ran to find Marleen to plead her son's lost cause.

Marleen's reply came from averted eyes: "I'm pitching the hay, can't you see?"

Marleen had cotton in her ears. Her face was as red as a flame. Here's what she said to her old maid: "We ran through his fingers like water."

"But don't you—"

"No. I pity you. He is your son, but he was marching to the cadence of the Beast."

Natasha heaped insults on Marleen; she shrieked at her; she even cuffed her once or twice, but Marleen took Natasha by the elbow and ordered her: "Out with the truth. Where do you keep him hidden, Baba?"

Thus came the end for Dominik, Natasha's only son. She tried to stop them with her body; they trampled over her. No grain shocks helped to camouflage the spot where Dominik was hiding like a mole, right in Natasha's lean-to, behind the cattle fence.

She sat there, hunched, and watched him vault and somersault and race in desperation for the street, fleeing the bellows of rage. She jumped up and ran shouting: "Take your feet in your

hands! Run! Run! Dominik, run!" and somebody shouted over her: "Here! This one's for you, you monster! Take your own medicine—" and everything turned afterwards into a big and bloody blur while someone tackled Dominik and threw him to the ground.

In triumph and in chains, they led him across town to the old, frozen tree, and there they put a shovel in his hand and said to him: "All right! Now! It's your turn."

He did an awkward job. His stolen glasses fogging over, he dug his grave beneath the heart that Hein had carved for a young girl one hot and muggy afternoon—that day when she forgot herself and slipped into his arms as though into a pouch, and afterwards Hein stroked her hair and gave her an enameled dish, for she was young and sweet and full of life, believing that the saints had power over all.

The soldiers made short shrift. Precision was their specialty. One bullet sent him sprawling.

It was a cold, wet, windy day. Natasha saw it all; she wasn't spared; nobody ever spared Natasha, but she was not alone, for to her right stood Mimi, and to her left, Marleen, and clinging to her legs was Erika, not even twelve years old, as timid as a rabbit, though she came from that extraordinary family who knew that right was right and wrong was wrong. No leeway in the middle.

Thus Erika watched all.

She watched Natasha hug the tree. She just clung hard to Baba's knees and felt her wet herself. She knew the neighbors pitied her old Baba, but it was more—too deep for words, too dark for any text. And then the bullet flew, and afterwards Marleen said to Natasha, gently:

"Come, Baba. Let us walk around the block—" while the entire populace shrank back.

They walked away. Together.

That day, it rained—a rain that turned to sleet. Black clouds were drifting through the skies. The trees stood dark and shad-

owy. Leaves shuffled underfoot. The world was broken twigs.

The day when justice came to Apanlee, a young girl heard Marleen say to her dearest Baba: "Were Yuri still alive today—" and Baba muttered from the depths of her own sorrow: "Oh, Marleen. Marleen. Yes. Oh, I remember. I remember—" and Marleen's jaw was set and hard and Baba's gaze was colorless while finishing the thought: "—were Yuri still alive today, he would be forty years of age—"

Marleen walked stoically. She held her frayed umbrella over Baba.

# Chapter 101

Some people still ask: "Why the Führer?" The answer is simplicity itself.

Had he been a sadist, it would have been different. Had he been a clown, it would have been different. Had he been a man with damp hands and a lopsided smile, he could not have lasted three days. But he was none of those.

He was a sorcerer, conferring sumptuous gifts the likes of which the anguished creed of Apanlee had never dreamed existed—and asking nothing but obedience in exchange. It was the fairest of concessions, and all surrendered to it willingly.

Good people everywhere took up the cry: "Let us have cleanliness again. Let us have order! Safety! Bread! Let's do away with chaos and corruption! Let us rebuild the things the Antichrist destroyed!"

The end result was: lots of pikes and spades. And all the while, from the convulsing earth came fat, black fumes—not of decay but of renewal. That's how it was. That's why.

The queues were gone. The horses were faultlessly groomed. The chickens, plucked clean and strung up by their legs, were

waiting for the pot. The stew was thick; you stuck your spoon in it, and it did not tip over. The chain of lorries never broke. The horses' bridles gleamed. Where *Landsers* marched, white handkerchief soon fluttered. Small children lined the roads with flowers in their hands.

*"Ein junges Volk steht auf*
*zum Sturm bereit*
*haut die Schranken doch zusammen, Kameraden—"*
*Wir fühlen nahen unsere Zeit*
*Ja, die Zeit der jungen Soldaten—"*

The lyrics were a kind that Erika had never heard before, but she learned fast; she sang as loudly as she could and filled her lungs with air. Oh, how those soldiers sang! Their field flasks, filled with pure, unsullied water, dangled from their leather belts as their Faith rose heavenward to let it be known that terror had come to an end.

*"Und welcher Feind*
*auch kommt*
*Mit Macht und List*
*seid nur ewig treu, ihr Kameraden*
*Der Herrgott, der im Himmel ist,*
*liebt die Treue der jungen Soldaten—"*

Nobody doubted the Führer would win. His panzers kept gobbling up miles. On trembling knees, his generals held maps marked with a shower of black crosses. Large cities fell into his pocket. Before the year was out, the onion domes shook to the fire of his cannons, while the vituperative enemy, the peaceful people learned, already trembled in his trousers. The solstice fires flared. The foe's forehead was covered with droplets. The young folk harvested potatoes, and cowardice and flabbiness were out.

When she was chosen as a member of the troop of handpicked children to be sent to Germany to be prepared for leadership, it was a great surprise to Erika. In fact, it was a shock.

"You've been selected for the highest honor," the teacher said,

puffed up with great importance. "What luck, to go to Germany, all by yourself, and help the Führer win the war."

That is how she was told that she would have to leave the only place she knew, maybe not ever to return. She was flooded with fear and frustration. She wanted to stay there, in Apanlee, with everybody else. She wanted to grow up, grow old, grow fat at Apanlee, like everybody else. Had anyone known of her feelings, there would have been hisses and hoots.

Nobody guessed the depth of mutiny.

"If you need an example, consider the Führer," said the teacher, for instance, reflecting the prevailing view, and fixing a stern, blue stare. When she entered the classroom, all children stood, shouting: "Heil Hitler!" Her finest pupils were allowed to shine her shoes for Sunday.

This teacher told her daily: "It is an honor, Erika. I call upon your mental discipline. You wish to serve. Don't you?"

"I do not want to go," thought Erika, hunkering beneath her ink-stained desk, and started biting on that hangnail, now burning like a tiny flame.

"You realize that it is of paramount importance to obey. There's nothing more important than nobility of service."

That wasn't it. The teacher had it wrong. Nobility of service was something Erika knew well because the trait was bred into her genes for countless generations. As far as she knew, the world was engaged in a chivalrous war; the Führer called upon her willingness; the Wehrmacht fanned its forces east and ever deeper east and drove its armored wedges deep into the heart of Russia to free the world from doom. The *Landsers* still marched eastwards.

The only trouble was: the trains returning from the front went west, and many now carried the wounded.

Jonathan stayed on at Apanlee for quite a while. The Wehrmacht staffers needed him: he spoke both Russian and Ukrainian fluently. His voice was throwing sparks.

He made the future clear to Mimi. "We'll craft an earthly

paradise," he told her many times. "As soon as we have scrubbed the scum and cleansed the world again, there will be bread for all."

She asked to anchor love. "Why not settle down as a family man?"

"As soon as we have won the war," said Jonathan, to camouflage and to protect himself, for soldiering came first.

She looked him over, head to toe. He was a man; he did not like to show his feelings openly, but she had no such reservations. Her love for him was absolute.

"I'm waiting, don't you know?" she said, hooked like a fish on Faith. "I love you, Jonathan."

She did not leave his side. The autumn afternoon still warmed her blood; the sky was vast, a white-flecked field of cotton. Her feelings, all of them, lay naked in the sun.

"I love you dearly, too. But first things first."

He forced down sentiment. He tried to steel himself. He saw himself as wedded to the Wehrmacht with one supreme command: to slay the Antichrist.

He tried to tell her that. He often said to her while she felt faint all over: "Chest upon chest and fist against fist, we must wrestle with the Spoiler, the Deceiver, with the Killer of all Culture, with the Jew."

She had no reply to his anger. She did not even hear, for she had her own dialogue. "If not today, then when?"

She felt pleasure in looking at herself. Each evening, when all the work was done, she sudsed herself and sang. Afterwards, she met him by the gate. She felt his muscles ripple; his body spoke a language all its own. She rested her head on his shoulder. She loved him; and he loved her back; both longed to propagate. She felt no deep responsibility toward herself or toward others, but she was human, yearning; in fact she was still virginal in thought if not in deed. She changed her chemise in her closet.

He said again: "It's us against them. It's that simple."

Who were his enemies? The Bolsheviks and Jews. He spoke

of them as one.

She knew half of the bitter equation.

He fleshed out the details. "It is the Hooked Cross," he said to her while she leaned cozily against him, "against the crooked nose."

"It must be so," said Mimi. She had been raised in blood and treachery and never known a life that didn't include firing squads. She who had lived so many bludgeoned years, conflicted in her loyalties, confused as to her nationality, had found her anchor now. The shoe was on the other foot, and that was no surprise.

She kept on watching him with shining eyes. She was allured. Bewitched. And time was of the essence. Natasha, black with age, observed the mating dance despite her lowered lashes.

Now that the Jews were finally revealed to Mimi as the instigators of the massacres of twenty bloody years—as guilty as the fiends of hell for having used the likes of Dominik to do their bloody deeds, as Jonathan explained—she cast away all doubt. The things she hadn't known before were now revealed to her, and it all fit a pattern. The sparrows pecked for bugs and worms. It was part of a natural law.

In turn, she passed it on. "The new millennium is here," she said to Erika. "And we must do our part."

"All right. All right," said Erika, who stuck as close to Jonathan as modesty allowed.

That way, she was like Mimi. She never missed a word. She gave the handsome *Landser* all the love she had stored up inside, and still had lots to spare.

"Perhaps tomorrow you and I—" she said, but he was busy elsewhere.

She ached for constancy. She had never had a father; he was as good as dead; the ice had swallowed him. She was not close enough to Mimi to think of her with love.

And Jonathan? He did not love her equally. He was in love with Mimi; he was enthralled by Mimi, and precious were the afternoons when he would take her clammy hand in his to talk

her fears away.

Between the girl and Mimi lay a gargantuan abyss. Here was another mystery impossible to solve; she, Erika, knew only that she was a minor minion and would have had no chance at all for anything, had it not been for Jonathan.

"She's prettier than I'll ever be, " she told him once, to which he merely smiled and gave her one quick hug.

"Yes, she is beautiful."

When Jonathan arrived and brought with him the might of Germany and fell in love with Mimi, she was a young and eager woman with one small daughter, that was all! a girl whose arms and legs had not yet grown harmoniously, but who had something in her eyes that needed to be calmed.

"More discipline," decided Mimi, and signed the travel papers to send the child away.

She acted on an ancient script. She was not good; she was not bad; she was the product of her times. She put her own life in the Führer's hands and let it go at that.

She had no false illusions. She knew that she was not exceptional. She needed Faith and certainty—the kind her martyred brothers knew—Faith in a future, in safety, in goodness. Her *Landser* filled that gap.

She counted on her fingers.

There was Marleen's odd brand of Faith that told her black was white and death was life and graves were resurrection. "My Lord has yet to fail me," Marleen said many times, against the brutest evidence, while dabbing at her eyes.

That would not do for Mimi. She was not foolish, like Marleen, an old-fashioned, faithful believer. Now that the Elders were allowed again to gospel His disciples, Marleen went to devotions faithfully and never missed a service, but church was not for Mimi. She could not see one single shred of evidence that God was good—against that idea rebelled not only her reason but her innermost instinct of justice. The God of yesterday, Marleen's beloved Lord, was an Invented Being. He had per-

mitted travesties for which a man would have been hanged or shot.

To wit, the villain Dominik who broke Natasha's heart.

Faith had not helped Natasha. Her useless saints smiled vacant smiles into her silence and her daze. Natasha had loved Dominik, her only rightful son, but then the death squads came and shot him dead and took him by the legs and threw him in the hole he had dug for himself. Once that was over with, Natasha never said a word.

These days Natasha shared her hut with chickens, piglets, and young calves, as she had done when she was young. Sometimes she stumbled; once she fell; but kept her Faith intact. Her face was gaunt; her knees were wobbly, full of knots; but she was back; she worked again at Apanlee, albeit at her leisure, she laid and lit Marleen's best fires. Without complaint, she carried her two water buckets on a chain tied to a yoke that lay across her shoulders. She still did all the laundry, as she had always done.

The older and the crankier she grew, the more she could do as she pleased, but never once did she let go of Faith that told her, black on white, that serfs were serfs and masters, masters. As in the olden days.

Had she put down her foot and said: "I will not wash another dish—" nobody would have said a word. She could have rebelled. But she didn't. A lifetime's work had twisted her, had nearly doubled her over; she was no longer quick in movement, and it was clear to all that she no longer earned her keep. Still, no one said a word.

Then there was Dewey's bitter Faith—the kind that dangled Jesus Christ while holding nourishment aloft. When she was small herself, younger than Erika was now, Mimi tried that one for size, and it had left her hungrier than before.

She well remembered him: a pesky missionary.

She had been sickened to her soul by Dewey's brand of Faith; she wanted none of that. By nature she was anything but philosophical, but this she knew instinctively: he violated what was

best in her with slime and sham and muck.

Then, as she grew into a teenager, she had put all her Faith in Stalin and joined the Pioneers. There was a time when Mimi, too, believed, that Stalin had the answers, as did the best of her young, hungry generation. That led to nowhere, either. That kind of Faith asked her to toss red flowers in the grave the neighbors dug for Yuri. The rage and anguish of her brother's execution had never left her heart.

And Sasha? Where was Sasha? Had faith helped Sasha one iota?

Not one small word about his whereabouts. The howls of winter had long swallowed Sasha. Such was his sorry end, despite the psalms that he had carried in a leather pouch to keep them safe from rain.

For years, the memory of her two martyred bothers had haunted Mimi, day and night; now it was gone; the Wehrmacht had swept it away. Autumn came early; the orchards were fragrant with fruit, and Mimi followed Faith in Fatherland and Führer as though it were a river.

The Führer spared no words, announcing he would have his *Landsers* walk the cobblestones of Moscow well before the year ran out of days, and, as a prelude to the final push for victory, he had his pincers opened wide to crush the old, defiant city of the tsars.

That victory would be the outcome, few doubted then, or later. The Führer was invincible; the evidence was there; his armies were already mauling Moscow. His soldiers were magnificent. They matched defiance with defiance, steel with more steel, each bullet with ten bullets.

But all that mattered not to Mimi. Above all else, the Führer handed her the tapestry of true romance, along with inner worth. All feelings of deep shame for wanting both—a Party to respect and follow and a family to love—were gone. The Führer said she could have both. She would. He moved her back into the ethnic fold where all was warm and good.

She was so much in love with Jonathan she couldn't eat or sleep. Her love flowed out from her like water from a tap; there was no end to it; her heart felt light and airy.

Her days were filled with work that gave her joy; her nights were warm with fires that threw scented sparks in the air. It was a moving time. She was in love with him; he was in love with her; the world was finally awash with certainty, although there always was to Jonathan, regrettably, a darkness and a fatalism that grated on her soul.

"If you dig deep enough, somewhere you'll find a Levi," he told her one more time, to which she had nothing noteworthy to say.

She wanted to placate; she did not want to hate. She could no more have changed her placid and accommodating nature than she could plow a cloud.

She watched him light himself a cigarette when memories came flooding in and smoke it hungrily. She knew that he was thinking of that childhood night she had once shared with him—a night so violent that it would take forever to cast it off for good. Yet odd to say, it unified. It welded her to him. And as the days grew shorter and chill came to the night, she sensed that hatred for the murderers who bloodied every room of Apanlee was now his driving force.

"We cannot co-exist," he told her one more time.

He started pacing back and forth in silence. She watched in fascination. He was lighting one cigarette butt on the next. His voice was thick with anguish. "We are condemned to win. We have the evidence. It's Jews who carried Bolshevism on their back the way a louse might carry typhus. There can't be compromise. It's us or them. That's it."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Trotsky—a Jew. Lenin—a Jew through his maternal grandfather's side. Karl Marx, descended on both sides from a long line of rabbis—"

She nodded, feeling sleepy. She did not need the Führer to

give her the hard facts. By heart, she knew the arguments that Jonathan outlined.

No wonder that he didn't like the Jews. Whoever liked the Jews? Nobody but nobody. The tsars had hated them with fury, and Stalin had not liked them, either; he often talked about their boils and biles and avarice and greed.

She countered, hoping that her voice would coax that rare, slow smile, and thereby soften him: "I know. I know. They all have large ears and sly smiles."

"What have they ever done except to live by usury and greed? How do they exist? How do they survive? By looting the rest of the world."

That, too. She knew about their habits of deception, trickery and greed. The liberated citizens of Russia, down to the lowliest peasant, were burning with fire and fury and wrath.

"Nobody ever wanted Jews except, perhaps, uncouth democracies. Look at America. That's where they nest. That's where they burrow, plot, and scheme. It will catch up with them."

She knew Jews liked to spread unrest; she didn't disagree at all; these things were understood; the point was that she did not share his hate. Hate wasn't in her nature.

"A thousand years and more," said Jonathan, fine shivers on his back, "all Europe stood united hating Jews, despising Jews, and persecuting Jews. Our world will know no peace until we drain the abscess."

She understood that he would feel like that, because he was a man, but she felt no such thing. She did not know a single Jew who had hurt anyone. But on the other hand—now that he pointed out the obvious—she was hard-pressed to come up with a single one of whom the neighborhood spoke kindly. She knew the ancient tale. She knew the bearded anarchists of yesterday that always carried bombs to shred the tsars all carried Hebrew names. The tsars had hanged them and beheaded them and sent them to Siberia—and come the Revolution, what was the end-result?

Rosa Luxemburg Streets. Karl Marx Communes.

Now Jonathan was pointing out the same. He was a soldier

and a man; he lived by strange, unyielding rules. She sighed and leaned against him tenderly. She closed her eyes and let him talk. Talk seemed to soothe his feelings.

He added, and his voice shook: "We fight against an enemy that feeds on human marrow," and Mimi said: "I know."

# Chapter 102

"Well? Are you ready, Erika?"

The choice had fallen like a hammer. It was already getting difficult to sort out in her heart whom she would miss the most. An afternoon went by before her heart stopped jumping.

Worse yet, there was no counter-argument—for she was getting on in years; another birthday was already coming up; and once that happened, she was old enough for Germany and no excuse would do. No saving margin left.

And in the meantime—discipline! And even though it had been hard enough in Soviet Russia to prove your worth and show exceptionality in sportsmanship beneath the Stalin frown, now it was even harder to please the Führer likewise, and—with no disrespect to anybody else!—the Führer was the best.

Therefore, Erika kept trying hard, for that was in her nature. She did not easily give up. She was a law-and-order person, too—in fact, when it came to obeying rules, she was one of the best.

She inspected herself in the mirror as though she were a stranger. She looked trim from tip to toe. Her shoulders were

straight. Her chin was held high. She looked presentable enough. The day she was chosen to carry the flag, even Natasha dropped dishes and towel and rushed to the window to see.

*"Ein junges Volk*
*steht auf*
*zum Sturm bereit—"*

The youngsters shouted lustily, and Erika did, too. She tried with all her might, while sighing and clucking along, determined to absorb that full, rich sense of goodness that was the future now.

She wore a smart, black skirt and snow-white blouse and a black handkerchief pulled through a leather ring. She stood to the left of the flagpole as though she had swallowed a ruler. She did her best to hoist the Führer lightning, as high as she could hoist it. She shouted herself raw:

*"We are marching for Hitler*
*through night and through darkness,*
*with the flag of youth snapping*
*for freedom and bread—"*

She helped to hang huge swastikas. The wind gusts kept scattering grain. Natasha was now pickling gherkins, and after that was done, it was the melon patch.

While Erika was waiting to be shipped to Germany, which could be any day—her suitcase was already packed and sitting in a corner—her duties were many and varied.

She filled her calendar with female domesticity. She gave her spare time to the Winter Aid. She strove to be politically reliable. She practiced her irregular verbs, for she was a studious youngster. She might forget to tie a shoe lace and trip on her own whimsy, because her thoughts were elsewhere, she never forgot an assignment. She stood at the top of her class; she had a quick mind and more wordsmithing talent than most if not all of her classmates; but that counted not; her racial essays counted not, and neither did her penmanship. She was a klutz. A klutz was not especially admired.

"When will you ever learn to do a cartwheel properly?" the teacher said, dispensing a withering glance.

"Tomorrow," whispered Erika, and all her classmates laughed.

They all despised her properly. The trapeze and parallel bars were their turf.

"Why not today?"

Why not? Her dreams got in the way.

"She is a child like any other child," said even Jonathan. "Just give her time. She'll learn."

But no. He had that wrong. Deep down, where she had learned to keep a murky, warm cocoon where she hid every dream, there was an acid knowledge: There was nothing heroic within her.

Even her shadow was thin: no wonder.

While others improved on their ideological growth, she sat and stared out of the window. The teacher talked of duty; she fought against a sneeze.

And when that happened, there were jeers. Her dreams got in the way.

It had to be a state of mind—no telling what Erika dreamed!

No two of her dreams were alike. That was the story of her life—bad luck because she dreamed. As soon as she put out the light, she dreamed. The moment she woke up, she dreamed. She even starved the calf because she dreamed, while milking the last drop out of a cow, not even noticing. Dreams were a terrible affliction. As much as possible, she kept them to herself, which was not always easy.

"She has a yen for the power of words. She plays with them as though they were smooth pebbles," said Jonathan one afternoon before the sun dropped back into the furrows, which was another way of saying without saying that Erika loved poetry.

That made her wish that she could cry without risking additional margin on which she was forging her worth, for chances were that Jonathan had been informed by then she was a hopeless klutz, since everybody knew.

With dusk came melancholy. Always.

She brushed against him with her pinkie. Somehow he seemed to understand just why she dreamed with eloquence against that murky fear, that nameless threat that had to do with leaving Apanlee, the place where she belonged. The limpid summer that brought Jonathan to Apanlee had given her at least one friend who understood implicitly why she was out of luck.

That is the strongest memory she carries to this day, that Jonathan found time for her once he discovered what she feared. To this day, when she thinks of Jonathan, she thinks of gentleness and kindly understanding. Although he was in combat uniform and trying not to show his sadness that soon he would be gone as well—for he would travel east to finish off the Antichrist with his bare hands while she was going west—he never hurried her. He never ordered her: "Snap out of it! This minute!"

He, too, lived on probation.

He took her right hand in his left and off they went, out for a walk. She could depend on him. Nobody else could spare the smallest minute.

Had it not been for Jonathan, she would have had no one. She worshipped Jonathan. She walked on tiptoes around Jonathan. His heart and hers were like two ladybugs, just talking with their wings.

"I'm just so scared," she told him once, and he replied with a small squeeze to ease her tensing shoulder:

"Let that be our secret."

Here was a true-blue friend, pretending not to see the spineless fear devouring her red heart. Somehow he understood the things she never even uttered, which was itself a miracle. He understood precisely why, instead of thrilling to the news that she was singled out for leadership, she was so woebegone inside that nothing seemed to help.

She built bridge after bridge with his help.

"There is a soul inside your body that eons have refined," he said to her, and bittersweet tranquility would settle in her heart

like silver. "And it cries out for family. Soil. Place and roots. Tranquility and permanence. You are too little now. One day you'll understand. Your nature is the consummate translation of your past. You are of peasant stock."

He spoke of a glorious future while rapping his boots with his stick. Pro-military, every inch of him, he nonetheless found words of sympathy and comfort until she was floating on air.

"We have to pay since nothing comes for free. I know the price is steep. The future makes it worth it. The Führer knows whoever holds the key to a child's heart owns the key to a glorious tomorrow."

As though she were a grown-up, he told her more and more.

"It will be a fight to the marrow. There is a force out there that does not want the clean, the good, the beautiful. It gorges itself on decay. It hates all that is healthy. And you are healthy, Erika. You have a lucid mind."

Easy for him to say. If Jonathan but knew the mutiny that dwelled within her heart the moment she thought "travel," he would have been appalled. All her emotions out of kilter, she clenched her fists and tried to hold herself together and brave the coming struggle. She was busy just keeping on breathing with two collapsed lungs in her chest.

"We have no choice. We don't. The individual is nothing. The Fatherland is all. It is the only way."

She hung her head. "I know. I try. I really do."

"See? You are wise beyond your years," said Jonathan.

That helped. It got her through another day. She knew she was a joy to him. He had no boundaries to his imagination either. He lavished her with images on which to shape her self.

That's what she still remembers. When Jonathan arrived to claim her mother's heart before she had a chance to claim it for herself, she was a shy sixth grader who did her backflips poorly. She was nobody's child, albeit from good ancestry—the ghost of Peet Neufeld was spooking about her veins.

The tombstones told her so.

"Always remember this: you are exceptional," said Jonathan, who didn't use praise lightly. And with her father dead and gone, the victim of a sentence fit for beasts, Marleen beside herself with busy-ness while feeding everyone, Natasha talking to herself and swiveling her head as though she were a weather vane, and Mimi still remote and vague, her loving gaze on Jonathan, it was no wonder that, for Erika, dreams were the only refuge.

The kinds of dreams she lavished on herself were like the sailing moon, phantoms of perfect silence, lights dimmed and motor turned way down. She lived with images. They took her breath away. She needed dreaming just as badly as other people needed food, and she could only dream in silence.

She knew where to find silence.

She crouched amid the gravestones of her ancestry and waited out the turmoil of emotions that ripped her heart apart. Her dreams cast shadow after shadow in hidden places where the soil was cool and musky and the air smelled sweetly of decaying leaves and moss. The gravestones were her favorite spot; here was the necessary proof that she was linked to wheat for at least seven generations, a matter of profound importance to critters big and small. She knew that she belonged at Apanlee. She hadn't yet left Apanlee but, *ach!* she felt that if she pulled up roots this young, there was no way to grow.

"I know exactly what you mean," said Jonathan. "The hardest thing to conquer is the will."

Somehow, when he put words to pain, she felt at peace and whole, for who she was and why she lived was interwoven in the proud, triumphant story of the wheat. She ventured forth her thoughts, all of them thin, unfinished, barely breathing.

"I'm just so scared," she said while dropping all pretense, and Jonathan said softly: "Your fears will pass. Just take my word for it."

If nothing else, she lived on that. He saw into the heart of things. He filled her heart with plenty. His words were never wooden. He never laughed at her or shamed her for her squeamishness. He talked to her as others never did—he spoke to her

with courtesy and patience while leaving space on either side for her to be herself.

He liked to visit where she liked to sit, where tombstones dated back to more than fourteen decades and lots of ivy grew. Inscriptions peeked out from the shrubbery, the source of many ornamental essays, all for her Racial Science class.

She had received a merit badge already for one elaborate essay she had composed in wide, artistic loops that told of her ancestral past. That's where she shone like no one else—not even the class bully, who took leap after bolting leap across all obstacles.

That crude barbarian could not keep his lineage straight at all; he kept on mixing forebears with posterity as though direction didn't count, now that the world moved forward. She, Erika, was different. She read that essay out aloud to Jonathan, selecting special passages: "My ancestors packed up and went into the land of opportunity, where they founded the cradle of wheat—"

"You have a proud, rich ancestry."

She flushed with gratitude. That way, she was richly endowed.

With her third eye she saw them very clearly—the somber men with well-trimmed beards, their women with their children, all clinging to their aprons. "They came to carve a kingdom from the soil—"

"—and it is up to you to live up to their legacy."

There was an obligation there, too huge for her small will. A small thought penetrated with a narrow tongue. "What if I can't come back?"

"Don't even think like that. Of course you will be back."

Out came her stubborn streak. "I want to stay at Apanlee."

"That's not an option, little one."

"Why not?"

"Because you aren't you. You are the tool of destiny."

He would squat down by her and talk to her in soothing, kindly words, warm palms around her fingers. He took her fear away. Her nature was tumultuous in every way, but when he spoke to her like that, something within her calmed.

"Look how the crosses have sunk deep into the earth," he said to her, and something settled in his eyes that looked like wilted flowers. "What does the Gospel say? 'All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, because the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass—'"

"—The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever. As for man—'"

"'—as for man, his days are like grass; as a flower of the field, so he flourishes. For the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its own place—'"

At that, she was near tears: "'—and its own place remembers it no more.'"

"We are born, and we die. It's that simple. Between life and death stands our duty."

She licked around her hangnail to keep herself from crying. He was a professional soldier, of course, who expected to die any minute. She, on the other hand, had not yet started living. She longed for life; she craned her neck to look at clouds and sky. Had anyone known that, there would have been loud sneers.

She feared demotion in his heart for cowardice, but on the other hand, she did not want to die for no appreciable gain. He understood that perfectly. He cupped her face in his warm hands. It was the tenderest of moments.

"I'll tell you a big secret, little one. We all know fear. That's only natural. Sometimes I am afraid I cannot measure up."

She leaned against his knee. It was as though he wore binoculars. "I try. I really do." She was determined to improve herself as best she could as soon as she could spy an opportunity. "I'll do my best. I promise."

"I know you do. That's all the Führer asks."

She tried repressing all emotion at the mandate. Fat tears started scalding her throat. That was the magic moment; that's when he took her on his lap and held her tight against his heart. He smelled of summer, sun and hay.

"There's acid in the cup of even the best war," said Jonathan.

His words were floating in the air like fragile apple blossoms. "But once the war is won, once we have slain the Antichrist, I promise you: your world will be utterly lovely."

She felt the warrior's heartbeat through his shirt against her hot, flushed cheek.

"You will have opportunities in Germany," said Jonathan, "I never had. Your mother never had. Whole generations never had. Whole generations never even fathomed—"

"I will?"

"You will have wealth of spirit, mind and body to dim your strongest dreams."

# Chapter 103

The Führer had declared: "I'll stand no nonsense from America," but still the airplanes sent from overseas kept streaming over Apanlee each day in black conveyor belts.

They flew with a calm treachery. They rose like ravens from the earth, passed overhead with a soft hum and dropped into a dim horizon without disturbing the landscape below. A mighty, impressive armada!

"Jackals. Jackals, all!" said Mimi, propelled by an unpleasant memory. "They will yet learn. They will."

She peered into the clouds, contempt like acid in her soul. She held them all in measureless disdain. To watch America take sides with Satan's kin as Apanlee was laying furrow after furrow so that the wheat could grow again—so that the world could eat!—just grieved her in her heart.

The wound that Dewey left had never fully healed. All she knew about America was brainless and disgusting. In a world without mercy, you needed a friend—and should not family be family? What twisted reasoning would make the distant country of her relatives choose sides—not with the Führer's cause but

with the monstrous murderers who had destroyed the creed?

"So let them harvest their own dragon's teeth for once," she told Marleen who, for her part, looked as though she, too, were chewing on raw garlic.

Marleen replied, not looking up while waiting for the kettle to start singing: "Yes, and to think that, once upon a time, we thought that we were kin—"

She did not finish what she meant to say, too overcome to speak.

It was late in the year, and frosty nights took turns with sunny days when Jonathan took leave of Apanlee to travel east and finish off the Beast. There was no time to have a sumptuous feast, for orders came to leave at once so as to fortify the front, by then in zigzag patterns.

"Well, better now than never," decided Mimi, and went to find herself a preacher who would not squabble needlessly.

She returned with a Calvary Baptist. He wasn't a regular Apanlee Elder; the Apanlee Elders were dead. This Baptist had a nasal voice and a bad cough; his eyes were watery; he wanted to know, timidly: "Didn't you have a husband already?"

She shook her head. "He's gone, not ever to return. Siberia swallowed him."

The Baptist stood his ground, but not for long—who could resist her smile? She kept on smiling prettily and pointed out the obvious: "You can augment your income with weddings."

He argued and reasoned a bit, but she rested her chin in her hands and kept smiling.

"All right. All right," he said. "Don't say you weren't warned."

She was a radiant bride. She wore her first long dress. The bridegroom wore his war fatigues. The year was deep into autumn; the flies succumbed in swarms.

"I will be back," said Jonathan. "Four weeks is all we need."

"I love you, Jonathan."

He hugged a roll of bedding to himself. "There is no way

that we can lose. You have my promise that I shall return. I want you to remember: our troops are in fine fettle."

She nodded her consent, with no idea where to send a letter. The Fatherland was now embroiled in the last stages of its fight to do away with illness, filth, deformity and cowardice, and it depended on each man, each woman, all bred to identical values—for it was honor, duty, mission, purpose and self-sacrifice, and nothing else had worth.

Before he left to slay the Beast and make the world safe for the kernels, she eagerly put on his uniform and had her picture taken while peering east through his binoculars.

"The land is vast," she said. "And winter at the door."

She felt her heart swell with emotion. She wrapped her love around him; she held him as though she would never let go. Against his epaulets, she whispered her own pledge. She knew she was budding with life. She did not tell him this; he didn't need that burden.

Marleen had this to say when Jonathan stopped briefly by the chicken coop where she was gathering fresh eggs: "This is, of course, a temporary measure?"

"That's right."

"You will be back?"

"Of course."

"And soon?"

"Relief is on the way. I have that piece of news on excellent authority."

She kept her fears in check. She clung to her own Faith. She laid her woes before Him, and He took care of things.

Not so Natasha, though.

Despite her age, Natasha started leaping like a frog when word came of his order to depart. She rushed about as though she'd lost her head until she saw a yellow hen; she caught it, made a chicken broth, and even served it up for Jonathan yet one more time in her enameled dish.

"Eat! Eat!" she said to him. "At least, put something solid in

your stomach."

"I count on you," he said to her as well, since she was family.

"Remember this," replied Natasha, as her face started crumbling as though they were parting forever: "You never once step into the same river twice."

She was trembling in great agitation long after Jonathan was gone. For weeks on end, she looked like a tarantula—all black, all tentacles, all bristles and all scorn. When asked what frenzied her, she did not have an answer.

The morning of Jonathan's leaving, the skies were black with rain, and Erika was clinging to his legs, a pale and stringy youngster, her stomach forming knots.

"Now, little one, don't you start fretting, too," said Jonathan and freed himself as gently as he could, but not before he promised her that he would not forget to send her cheerful postcards. "Put on your thinking cap."

A painful conversation followed. He fumbled for an address in his pocket and handed it to her.

"Here. Here's the address that you need. Be sure to memorize it well. Her name is Heidi. Don't forget. She is the best. She is safety and goodness and wisdom. She'll take you in, no matter what. Just take my word for it."

"Why now? Why now?" bawled Erika. Against her will, fat tears began to fall. "I'll be a stranger there." There was nothing but fog in her heart. She knew his sense of destiny was flawless; she still had miles to go.

He had no answer to this kind of mutiny, but his strong hand closed hard around her fingers.

"She has a daughter just like you. Her name is Lilo. She'll melt your heart. You will not be alone. You'll learn from her. I'll ask her personally to be your friend. I'll write to her. She's loyal. She'll stick by you. You'll have a lot of fun."

She stared at the picture he pulled out of his wallet. It showed a lively, sun-tanned teenager, replete with dirndl, lifted chin, straight back and saucy smile. A dog stood next to her—a mutt

with floppy ears, a silly grin and an enormous bottom.

"We need the strongest and the best. Ahead of us lie years of blood and fire. This is a struggle to the marrow. Remember that. The individual is nothing. The Fatherland is all."

In light of this civility, she had no choice—she blinked away her tears. The future had a need for robust, wholesome sassiness, not in her nature, sadly. She was afflicted with a wistful melancholia. She was a little female at whom fingers would be pointed, because she acted selfishly when sacrifice was now the order of the day and valor at a premium.

"All right," she sighed, still unconvinced, because she longed to please the *Landser.*

For her sadness at Jonathan's leaving, she was seized with shame and remorse. She looked at the picture more closely. Lilo was already fourteen, older than she by three years, a powerful swimmer, a favorite to raise the flag, her patriot cap tucked in her belt, a girl who hid a fiery, independent mind behind her fringed, gold lashes.

Compared to that as a potential friend, what was a little sacrifice of will?

The days slipped by like beads of mercury, not ever to return. The Wehrmacht slipped as well. There was talk about that, though obliquely. The Wehrmacht slipped and stalled, but every gun still kept on blazing to the east and, at long last, the front had stabilized. That's what the broadcast said.

For weeks on end, it had been stalemate after stalemate. But now the tide of war would turn and victory would come.

December was dusting the landscape. The roofs of Apanlee were glittering with freshly fallen snow. The wind sat, howling, in the chimneys, and Mimi linked her arms with Baba, pink in her happiness, a puzzle even to herself, and said to her: "—imagine, a bare-bottomed baby—" and, at that moment, Baba started thinking with her heart.

A sleigh of mail fell into hostile hands. A lone and dirty

letter—half-torn, with pages missing—arrived in time for Christmas.

"We are still laying siege to the stone heart of Moscow," wrote Jonathan to Mimi.

With swimming eyes, she finished reading it. When she had savored every comma, she hid the letter carefully. She dropped it in a bottom drawer and slammed that drawer shut.

She thought: "No need to cause alarm. He takes direct instructions from the Führer."

All week, she had felt slightly feverish, as though a cold were lingering and wouldn't go away, an odd, persistent chill.

"Don't bite your nails," she scolded, irritably, for Erika cast shy and probing glances upon her rounding belly and gave her long and searching looks.

Weeks passed, then months.

The winter seemed to last forever, but finally spring came. The snow turned into slush; the slush turned into water. Snowdrops appeared. Tulips stood like soldiers in neat rows. Pretty soon, the clover was in bloom. The trees were waking, one by one, and nature, brush in hand, hued daisies, violets, and poppies.

April arrived, with gusts of wind that sent dogs cowering and chickens clucking oddly. The Führer's panzers still kept rolling eastwards over barricades. The searchlights kept on playing with the clouds.

The neighbors talked of nothing but the weather.

Marleen was kneading zwieback with hard knuckles.

Natasha walked on tiptoes for three days until a tiny cry was added to the universe while, in the east, whole armies fought and died.

Jonathan had disappeared into the wastes of Russia, his belt and dagger locked in place, to aid in the decisive battle and finish off the war, but he had left his legacy—a baby, plump and pink.

This child was the talk of the village. The neighbors were

lavish in praise, their faces brimming with awe. The little infant was perfection; that was the thought that stayed; it had its own tap root.

The kettle was singing with steam. The skies were bright and clear. The kernels would keep swelling and hardening with summer, wind and sun.

Mimi half-dozed, peacefully, after a satisfying meal, just basking in the sunshine, glad she was slim once more. "A body made for motherhood," Jonathan had said to her, poetic and romantic, but follow-up was difficult, for mothering was hard.

She had tried once, without much luck. Despite much effort, Erika remained an anxious child, intensely shy, self-conscious and uneasy, on tiptoes inwardly, with the weight of the world on her shoulders. She, Mimi, had a second baby now and did the best she could. She kept the baby swaddled. She kept on burping it. But Natasha was probably right: her motherly engine was sluggish.

"Look. Look what I have here," coaxed Mimi one hot afternoon, adopting a gravelly voice.

Natasha kept mopping her forehead in silence.

"Who'll kiss those tiny toes?" asked Mimi and stood in Baba's path while giving Erika a pat and then a small, firm shove. "Who'll count its baby teeth?"

Now this?

It was a grievous time for Erika, who fled to curl up in the grass, from where she watched and listened. Her heart leaped like a carp. She was in pain; it was a Sunday afternoon, and Sunday added to her pain, for there was little else to do except to think of what was looming like an alp: her pending trip to Germany.

Effusiveness was Mimi's specialty. "Look at those little tufts of hair. Look at that grim and wrinkled nose! Look at those small, clenched fists."

Natasha pulled her head between her shoulders, and had nothing to say in reply. Her heart was still sore for the son who was

shot at the Führer's behest. Why? Because he had been wild for plunder? Because he had enforced the Party's bloody reign? Now, no one spoke of it.

Mimi laid careful siege. "There's something wrong with it."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Natasha's eyes were everywhere except on the small bundle.

"It doesn't want to suckle." Mimi eased herself into the grass to sit at Baba's feet.

*"Nu? Nu?"*

"An upset stomach, that's my guess. That's what I think. What do you think? Its tummy just doesn't seem settled."

Natasha kept squelching temptation with many a withering look, but Mimi gave her yet another foxy smile. "I wonder if there's something wrong? Do you have some advice?"

"Who, me? You ask an old donkey like me?"

"I still remember when I had the chills and shakes, and how you multiplied your kisses. Don't bother denying it, Baba."

The minutes ticked away. Natasha spoke at last. "Is that a bottle child?"

"As if you didn't know," said Mimi, and tried to hide a smile.

"Have you no conscience, Mimi?"

"You know I have no time to burn."

"Don't tell me that. A baby is a baby."

"Well, it is true. I had counted on you, but I guess that I was wrong. I had hoped you would give me a hand. There now! I said my piece. Now it's your turn. You know how to baby a baby—"

Natasha allowed herself a small sigh and spoke in a thin, careful voice. "I'm too old to give my heart away."

" *Oops!* Did you hear that? It's oozing into its diapers."

Natasha stared at the infant longingly, her lower lip pushed out, in her old ears the pounding of the sea. She cupped her ear to hear better. She leaned forward to get a good whiff.

"I meant to tell you years ago," smiled Mimi, now happily airing the baby, "how I enjoyed it, snuggling on your bosom and riding on your hip. You think I don't remember?"

Natasha braced herself against the surge of tenderness that came cresting at her, like a wave. Her cheeks turned a deep red. She kept scratching her head. Her jaws were crunching something. At last, she offered in a strangled voice: "I wonder if it's feverish?"

"Could be. Could be a running fever. I still remember that odd summer day when measles struck, just as the flies succumbed and babies in the village started choking. You were the only one who knew what to do next. You sliced three onions crosswise."

Natasha shied away from the small, stirring bundle as though it were a twirling river and she an animal refusing to walk in.

But Mimi had no mercy. She was playing a great game of patience.

"Here. Why not cuddle it so I can tie my apron? Do me a favor, will you? Just keep the flies away." She put the baby smack into Natasha's lap so she could blow her nose. "I guess I'll have to think of something, since you don't seem to care. Have you ever seen baby eyes sparkle like that? It must be feverish."

Natasha was thirsting to death, and here was a bucket of water.

"Just once. Just for today," she told the infant awkwardly, who silently stared back at her with baffling, questing eyes.

There was no point pretending; a baby was a baby; fresh air and warm sunshine would not be enough to forestall disaster to come. "Here. Here's my lap. Snooze for a little while."

A tiny nose twitch, that was all.

That was the last straw for Natasha. It plucked her heart like a ripe cherry from a tree.

The face of her favorite virgin was dark.

She dressed it with flowers in season.

She ruled, a peasant dowager with feet curled by arthritis, in the rejuvenated nursery. Its yellow window panes shone in the night, like gold. Here was the only place of permanence and continuity that old Natasha knew, and that was good enough.

When others had long since gone to bed, she sat in the dark, the infant's arms and legs just melting in her lap, to mutter her time-tested prayers. She besieged her icons ceaselessly; she whispered to chase away evil: "These things do not happen to babies—"

But of course she knew better. They had happened before.

She did not know what would be coming at her honey child tomorrow, but this she knew with certainty: She had a baby once again to cherish and revere. A river was returning to its bed.

She listened to the promptings of her nature. Strange is the human heart.

# Chapter 104

The day arrived when Mimi smiled one of her iffy smiles and asked: "Well, are you ready, Erika?" to which the answer was: "I guess so. Sure. Why not?"

"Good. It's settled then," said Mimi, ruffling her daughter's hair. "I have a lucky feeling about Germany. Don't you?"

"I guess."

"What's wrong now? Answer me. Why are you looking glum?"

"I'm not," insisted Erika, walking a narrow line. She did not want to give herself another case of nerves, thus spoiling everything.

"Don't make a scene. Please. With the Führer on your right and God Almighty on your left, you can't go wrong. It's settled."

Much of the time remaining was given over to pondering her cowardice—not that that eased her pain. But such was the seductive power of the Fatherland: she knew that she was envied greatly in the neighborhood for having been selected carefully on nothing but the strength of her scholastic enterprise. Of that, there was no doubt. In class, she was the best.

Now there could be no more excuses.

She walked on wooden legs, stiff with self-consciousness, between her mother and her grandmother to board the fated train. Natasha trod behind.

"Here's something for the road. You cannot travel on an empty stomach," said Marleen, handing her a coffee twist.

"I'm not hungry."

'Yes, you are."

"I'm not."

"At least put something in your stomach." urged Marleen, for her part looking straight ahead. In her face sat a hard, triumphant pride. "You can't pass up a chance like this. This is your chance. Remember that. Not every youngster is as lucky."

"I know."

"And don't forget to air your feather pillows. You hear me? It's important."

"I won't."

"That way, they'll stay plump. Once every two weeks. Be sure not to forget."

"I know. You told me yesterday."

She kept her glance glued to her toes. She longed to sit down by the wayside, curl up, climb up one last time in Natasha's lap and hide herself deep in her loving arms as she had done since infancy, but that chance, too, was gone. Natasha was burping the baby.

"Out in the sun they go. No matter what. All right? Be sure not to forget. Be sure not to neglect your pillows. There will be no excuses."

"I won't. I won't forget."

Now she was getting red in the face, and still redder. She tried to put one foot before the other and look as normal as she could. There was no point in saying anything; it would not get her anywhere; she was lacking in fiber and spirit. She was demoralizing Germany. No wonder that the Führer saw it necessary to whisk her off to be re-educated and reformed.

"And don't let your blouse hang out of your skirt."

"I won't."

"And don't forget to say your prayers every night and mention just as many Christians—"

"—I know. I know. As many Christians as I can."

There was nothing to do but to echo. Chilled by a sense of doom, she didn't argue and she didn't plead; she just kept her glance on her toes; what else was there to say? Her duties were outlined for her, as orderly and sensible as numbered pages in a book.

One more time, Mimi, smiling an expansive smile: "Please. Don't forget to write. Be sure to send us postcards. We love the way you write. Don't we all love the way she writes? Why, even Jonathan—"

And Baba, too, her lower lip protruding, her face as pitted as a moonscape, still being practical: "And don't forget. It's critically important. If you have to go, you have to go. Don't be ashamed. Just knock on any door. Just ask politely where the outhouse is. Don't go behind the bushes, no matter what the urgency."

"I won't." She had pondered her undersized bladder as well as her oversized ears.

But Baba gave the train an evil look and didn't even hear. "It's nature, Mimi. Nature."

"I know."

"The main thing is to keep your privates private," counseled Baba, while giving her a nod. "Here. Blow your nose. Here's my apron, honey."

It was sheer agony. This was the supreme test of fortitude. This was her chance to turn a brand new leaf; tears would ruin everything. She was busy returning salutes. Now was the time to find out if she had a spine, and willing to conduct herself with bravery, or if she was a hopeless case with acid in her stomach. The least she could do was obey. It was best to keep ferment inside. In Germany they wouldn't know she was a fourth-rate slacker.

"And don't let the boys whistle at you," said Mimi one last time, bending daintily to kiss her on both cheeks. "You'll soon be a comely young woman."

"No! Absolutely not! Here! Here's my handkerchief!" said Marleen, now talking clear out of her head. " Just keep it. Keep it in safe-keeping. Just put it in your sleeve."

"One day I shall return," she told the gray horizon, without a voice this time, to have the final word. That was the hope to which she clung as she stood, waiting for the train to come to a full stop. It had two special, flag-draped wagons, hitched to the back and set aside for other lucky youngsters like herself, their destinies, too, anything but clear.

All four stood patiently and waited by the platform until the train conductor said: "It's time now. Sign the register." Which was what she did, shakily, her insides feeling woozy.

"Well, then. Good-bye. And may the Lord be praised."

"The Lord be praised," repeated Erika, and climbed up on the train. She stood bewildered on the platform, chockful with other gifted youngsters like herself.

The wind pushed pillows through the blueness of the sky. The other children sang. Not one of them was weeping. She hummed along, her throat constricted shamefully, her toes curled slightly inward as per Natasha's last instructions against the malice of the universe, so as to boost her luck.

*"Muss i'denn, muss i' denn*
*zum Städtele hinaus, Städtele hinaus*
*und du, mein Schatz, bleibst hier—"*

The train became an arch. It leaned around a curve, and she was counting wagons, all rolling westwards.

Home.

Into the heart of Germany, the country of her ancestry, besieged on every front.

She looked with blurred eyes along the lines of steel that now stole Apanlee from her—the manor house first, then the rest. It happened very slowly.

She still remembers it. The locomotive hooted once and

started panting breathlessly. The wheels spun, clattering, and her entire childhood disappeared as though a hand swept clean a slate. The fields where Jesus went through the grain on the Sabbath. A neighbor struggling bravely with a cantankerous old mare. Natasha fluttering her handkerchief. Marleen, who did not spare her proverbs.

And Mimi. Slim and beautiful. Small. Getting smaller. Shrinking.

Trees. Hedges. Silos. All.

That was the last time Erika saw Apanlee.

That fall, Natasha grew so rickety that only with great effort could she still navigate the stairs that led into the attic where she would dig for old, discarded things—things she could confiscate and then restore to glory. Hein's quilt. His sheepskin and his woolen socks. His favorite ax, with which he'd chopped the morning's kindling wood. His boots, in need of oil.

The steps to the attic were steep and her legs gave her trouble; her toes hurt like blazes as well, but she wanted those boots; she knew they were there, perhaps in some old trunk—footwear still from the olden days, still perfectly acceptable. She dug and dug for them and, finally, when she found first one, then the other, she spent days kneading the cracked leather, with oil and then with butter.

When they were soft enough and did not hurt her bunions, she wore those boots day-in, day-out, in silence transcending her status. She developed odd habits like that. Back in her youthful days, to taunt Marleen, to make her wild with jealousy, she sometimes did such things, to tease and to provoke. That was a long, long time ago, when she was young, a sturdy girl in a red skirt, with beads around her neck.

Now she was old. She was not only old but worn, replete with latticed wrinkles. She kept herself glued to the clan. There was no name for it, this need to stick to them. She didn't, when tormented by strange glances in the neighborhood, have a sufficient explanation.

Fate was just that—too deep for words, too vague for any script.

By then, she and the family had been long intertwined in ways that none of them could understand and did not even try. She cared not what others thought of her; neither did Marleen. As far as anyone could tell, she was their equal now: she had a baby once again to carry on tradition. That baby had its place at Apanlee, the center of the universe.

She would follow them into the grave.

She still ducked into doors when she heard the soldiers march, recoiling from close contact. Their faces were set like the east wind; they gathered their captives like sand; they heaped up mounds of earth; and even though, in quiet moments, all that had been explained to her by Mimi with large and liquid eyes, while Marleen kept on hunting for excuses in her Bible, Natasha listened mutely, while gazing up at a neglected saint whose smile was visibly fading.

"Bad medicine," she said, but only to herself. He had sharp eyes in her old head: the Wehrmacht was still executing traitors. Grim searches flushed them out. While sunshine still streamed in warm sheets all over Apanlee, the Wehrmacht sacked and burned the fields of many Russian villages, in search of spies and partisans, all of them multiplying now, all striking in cunning disguises.

Bad medicine. Bad medicine.

Natasha shook her grizzled mane and mopped another tear. For days, the traitors to the Fatherland lay mangled in the weeds until somebody took them by the legs and dragged them out of sight.

The losses that the Wehrmacht suffered, while the dog days of a belated second occupation summer still dragged on, were all blamed on mysterious sabotage.

Faceless, silent saboteurs, who multiplied like gophers in the fields, threw nails into machinery and glass bits in the sol-

diers' food; if a door sign said "Typhus!" they checked.

It was a brutal war and getting worse; the *Landsers* mercilessly punished sabotage by shooting traitors on the spot, but even so, it now became increasingly important to draw a line between who was behind the Führer, who was not.

Meanwhile, still girdles of flashes, still hot rings of fire. And meanwhile, the bomb and the ditch and the torch. Yet the songs were as ringing as ever.

*"Vor uns*
*marschieren*
*mit sturmzerfetzten Fahnen*
*die toten Helden*
*der jungen Nation—"*

In the crisp autumn air, it was still easy to believe that final victory was just around the corner. At most, it would now be a matter of weeks.

Plumes of black smoke marked the replenishment that kept on rolling east with rested limbs and polished boots, and people pushed and shoved to get a better look. The next, decisive blow, they knew, would put an end to battles.

The woods were full of bodies; but here, at Apanlee, there was still peace; there was a brand new baby with blond hair, blue eyes, firm limbs, and not a single crease. Natasha rocked it faithfully so as to borrow time, the day having faded—it still hadn't cooled!—while pouring tested lullabies into its rosy ears. To see a little soldier's child unfold in safety, wrapped in love, much like a genial spring, petal by tender petal, tucked deep into a feather quilt, was almost more than anyone could bear.

It was a pensive time for Mimi. She dusted the family portraits and pondered their pacifist frowns.

No word as yet from Jonathan. He still was fighting in the trenches; he didn't even know he had a child; his letters had stopped coming. She still wrote her reports to him, not sure that they would reach him, for more and more there were delays, and sabotage, and yet more sabotage, and mailbags went astray.

"I miss you so," she wrote. She missed him dreadfully. "But knowing that each battle is magnificent and just," she added, for she had Faith galore that shone through every word, "what is a small delay?" She was composed of nothing but enthusiasm.

She said so to Natasha.

Natasha did what she had always done, though now her feet were twisted with arthritis like two pretzels.

"Just you remember this: I have no other family," Natasha said to Mimi, lest anyone forget, and hung another diaper between two carefully placed chairs.

The child changed the equation and tipped the scales for her. Had it not been for this new child, still pink and plump—a much-belated blessing from a forgotten saint Natasha had neglected shamefully for many years but now kept in good spirits with candle after candle—she would have been an old and useless Baba, her life not worth a kopeck.

Now she was everything, for it was everything.

This honeychild, in Baba's safekeep, firmly, was Jonathan's and Mimi's; she had raised them both; they had their faults; their cause was hers by proxy. Her own survival was enmeshed with the survival of these people, who were her kin if not by blood, at least by history—so it had always been; so it would always be. This family was all she had; if they were foolish, they were foolish; she bore that stoically; what else was there to do?

They were her family. No family was perfect.

She did not judge them harshly. She judged them not at all. She gave the infant her left finger. She slowed her old, rheumatic gait to match the baby's waddle.

There was no point pretending. The Wehrmacht kept delivering its crushing blows, but somehow, victory eluded reach. Weeks became months, and no end yet in sight. The fighting continued. Enormous waste at every turn. Delay at every opportunity.

The fields stood shorn. The rain did not let up. The flags

were fading in the downpour. Natasha, bent and silent, still carried water in her wooden buckets to soak another batch of diapers for the child.

She dumped another load of kindling by the stove with a decided clatter.

She had a nose, and it smelled ashes. She had good ears in her old head; they overheard some hoodlums muttering that they would drive the Führer out of Russia.

She saw a ruffian take a match and put it to a swastika. The traitor was never discovered and punished.

She spoke her mind, since she was family, and here is what she said: "The shadows are lengthening slowly. It is time to start roasting the zwieback. We'll need them on the road."

"What kind of talk is that?" asked Mimi, humming to herself. She kept patting Natasha's bent back. Allowances were made for Baba who was old, bent, worn out from work and worry and, hence, cantankerous.

Natasha showed her stubborn streak. "I can see twilight falling, and then night."

"You are too old, in any case, to have to worry, Baba."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Go soak your old feet in hot water."

Nobody argued with Natasha, for she had paid her dues; she was entitled to her opinions; if she so chose, she could be ornery. She had a right to be. These days, that was her specialty. She spoke her mind; she had a voice that could not be ignored. She acted like a bloodhound on the scent. She said to anyone who bothered giving her the time of day, in scalding undertones: "It's later than you think."

Not that it did her any good. Deaf ears, and that was all.

"I'm coming with you, don't you know?" she told Marleen as well.

They still sat together at sunset. Came midnight, they still sat together in silence.

"Go soak your bones, Natasha," was Marleen's soft reply.

"Did you hear me? This minute, answer me."

"Not one of us, Natasha, knows every single answer. Your son. My son. You're a Ukrainian. I am German. Where is the balance sheet?"

That, too.

Unspoken but deep, that was there. She had lost a son, but that son had been guilty beyond pardon. Her Dominik had been a criminal, and so he'd paid. He'd paid.

She often pondered that. Like a hornet, he paid for his life for having used his stinger. He did, and that evened the ledger. That's why she and Marleen could sit together, peacefully, with little need to speak. Now Dominik lay in a dark and shameful grave, and no one said a word.

She didn't either. Never.

Deep down where justice stashed, there was this lucid thought: if you committed crimes, you paid. That was the iron law. The old oak tree that held the bold initials Hein had carved out to advertise their love had tried to heal itself, but had succeeded only partially; the bullet holes were worn; the cartridges lay rusting in the grass.

Natasha thought of Dominik with a soft tug at her old heart but with a somber resignation. She was the only one who still, in painful memory, would cluck her tongue and dab her eyes in grief. She grieved for him in useless recollection. When he was shot, she shrieked as loudly as she could because he was her son! her son! She loved him throughout thick and thin because her nature said she should—but she had never brooded on his execution.

If you committed crimes, you paid.

It was the simplest of equations. The blood her no-good son had spilled at Apanlee had been avenged; he had his due; it was his fault and that was that; some people said so openly, right to her face, despite her anguished eyes.

She sighed. She should have stripped him of his shirt when he was small, and put him on an anthill. That's what she should have done.

All that lay in the past. The gossips had stopped snarling at her openly; Marleen had seen to that.

Marleen had told the neighborhood: "What Dominik has done was not Natasha's fault," and no one challenged her. And though a mother's heart might break into a thousand pieces, deep down Natasha knew: that was at one with the old, noble order. Justice had been restored.

But her people. Her trusting, Ukrainian people!

What had they done? Why were they being shoved of late with shouts and sometimes even butts into the waiting cattle cars?

They had pelted the Wehrmacht with roses. They had knelt in the streets; they had wept with relief and abandon as they held up with shaking hands their greetings when the *Landsers* came.

"God sent you! God sent you! Why, here is bread and salt!"

These self-same peasants who had knelt, tears streaming down their faces for having been delivered from the Beast, who had held up their infants to be blessed, no longer knelt and wept with gratitude. These days they drew aside to let the *Landser* pass—not with applause but with odd, hooded looks and nervous smiles. Now they were muttering: "It's not yet the end of the story. Just so you know. Just so you know. Carrion, that's what you'll eat. Mule meat, that's what you'll eat."

Now there was simmering, poisonous hatred. The sparrows carried rumors. A crucial battle had gone sour in the east.

# Chapter 105

Heidi was very proud of her, reported Erika. "I miss you so," she wrote. "I miss you dreadfully."

She sent along a colored map of the entire theater of war. She had marked up the parts that had to be revamped toward the glory of the Reich, and they included Apanlee.

"But first things first," she wrote, still clumsy and still homesick, despite much effort on her part to overcome her ills. "First we must win this war."

Marleen would always wash her hands and stroke away the paper creases, proud that her grandchild had become an accomplished artist with her pen. Her writing did not slant to either side. Her letters were no longer weak and spidery. She decorated every margin with tiny little swastikas that danced on the crisp page.

She wrote: "It's now a two-front war." The bombs, of which she told that kept on plummeting from the gray sky smack into German cities, came from America.

On account of the bombing, school was sporadic; male teachers had long since been drafted, and sometimes sirens howled so

loud you couldn't hear a word.

Which did not mean, she wrote, that she was ever idle. "No, on the contrary. Each morning, up at six!"

She kept reporting faithfully that the beloved Führer was verily the savior of all Europe and would soon be the savior of the world.

These letters brought much joy to Apanlee, where for two glorious seasons, the harvests belonged to the people. Here as there, the Allied airships kept on passing overhead each day, still flying high and in large numbers, formation by formation. While still the sun shone, as the last days of summer slowly faded, the planes had seemed like schools of fish—small, silvery, benevolent, just dancing in the air. But now that fall was here, they looked like geese or ravens.

It was clear that the Wehrmacht had run into trouble.

It took the Führer only eighteen days to conquer Poland, but then a winter came and went; the Wehrmacht didn't move an inch. The stars grew dim; the songs grew leaden; the pageantry was fading visibly. A troop of Hitler Youth roped off the Square of Victory to celebrate another holiday, but never finished building a huge stage. It started getting cold and windy. Just yesterday, the *Landsers* came as worshipped saviors, this at the very hour when the earth was closest to the sun. Now days grew short and nights grew long, and countless troops passed by in silent, care-worn columns, still chewing up the road with panzer after panzer, turrets rotating. Opening its giant pincers wide, the Wehrmacht still closed in on Moscow's onion domes, but from the front came distressing reports.

It was now claimed by several obstructionists that a small band of partisans had infested the army's rear ranks.

A shipment of mittens was lost.

Food was getting short.

The shells shipped to assist the Wehrmacht to finish off the war had something wrong with them.

The *Landsers,* bringing all their shiny guns to bear upon the onion domes, stopped dead in their advance to watch a spooky sight: three weeks before the Holy Days, the city's hackles rose

as though it were a dog.

Meanwhile, long trains loaded with wounded men were pulling westward silently. One train derailed because of sabotage, and there were many casualties. Those who survived had little to report.

The *Landsers*, to a man, were nonchalant, however. They kept assuring everyone: "One more decisive battle."

Their faces gray, their uniforms caked, they kept arriving on their stretchers to fill up every room at Apanlee, their bandages soaked through with blood. The count was disconcerting: that many wounded? Just one train?

For weeks on end, the accident kept every spare hand busy.

Natasha did not waste her thoughts and worries on herself. With trembling hands, Natasha lit the morning fires and started serving breakfast.

She spoke her mind at every opportunity and meanwhile kept her vigil, and here is what she said: "Of course. Right. Sure. One more decisive battle. Weather permitting. Weather permitting."

She moved among them freely, helping out. She took things as they came, did what she could, said what needed saying, and rocked the baby, meanwhile. The wind howled in the chimneys. The Führer, said the broadcast, was incensed.

No word for months from Jonathan, although good news arrived, to be passed on at once: the Führer's generals had finally decided on assault. The strategy for an offensive, which had been speculated on, seemed in its final stages. The waiting continued. The news became darker and darker.

The *Landsers,* stationed around Apanlee were practicing their shots, but their bullets fell shy of the mark.

Weeks became months, and the front didn't budge.

A clump of soil came out of nowhere and landed on Marleen's set supper table. That's how Natasha knew.

She shook it out without a word. She was exuding a general

gloom. The Fatherland was ever more in need of a strong labor force; Natasha watched as a distressed and helpless Russian populace was being shoved into the cattle cars that kept on heading west.

Those were the lucky ones—for more and more, Natasha saw, were walking west, on foot, in long, despairing columns, all carrying their spades and shovels on their backs, all bent and gray, no better off than slaves.

A second column formed. A third.

"Hope came on silver wings," the peasants whispered to each other. "Despair flaps its wings like a raven."

She watched it all in silence. The balance was tilting again. For this had not yet changed: they, too, came as eagles, hasting to eat. They, too, came for the guilty and the innocent alike.

The wind blew soot and ashes into Natasha's smarting eyes as she scanned the heavens for news. She knew, by then, that it would be a headlong rush to beat the calendar, to take the onion domes before the sky ran out of sun, which could be any day.

Things went from bad to worse.

First, it was weeks and weeks of rain. The rains did not let up. Then came the cold. The *Landsers* started ripping straw from peasant roofs and stuffed it in their boots, for socks were scarce, and soon a luxury.

The cheering multitudes fell silent.

The fields turned into mire. The trenches filled with muddy water. Ice crusts formed along the edges. One wintry afternoon, fat snowflakes started falling gently, melting only with reluctance—and nothing was ever the same.

The thermometer plunged. The Führer's horses drooped for want of warmth and fodder. The soldiers started cutting up their carcasses. More tanks stalled. Guns fell silent. The oil froze in the trucks. The troopers wrapped themselves in bedspreads. Before another month was gone, the Wehrmacht hid in Russian huts in search of fire. Warmth.

Next came the sound.

When Erika, in later years, researched the script for *Left and Right*, it sprang at her again from out between the crumbling pages of a book. In vain, she looked where she had seen or heard it first, but it was vivid.

Swish!

Swish, said the sound. Swish. Swish.

It sallied from Siberia, in sleds drawn by small, wily horses. It came with sabers drawn. It rose from under the horizon. It surged from frigid tundra in the north, and from the Ural Mountains in the east. It fell like furry locusts from the hills. It floated silently through winter nights on skis that were carefully oiled.

It wore warm, quilted pants and furry caps, and it was gossiped even then: the Star of David financed it.

Swish, said the sound. Swish. Swish. At Apanlee, Natasha heard it clearly. And what Natasha saw with her third eye was this: the Russian people started sweeping every snowy street before the wily ghosts from out the icy tomb of hell with ready, reedy brooms.

After a long and puzzling delay, two meager sacks of Wehrmacht mail arrived.

Eagerly, Mimi tore open the seals. Three letters were addressed to her; she read them with a swelling heart and overflowing eyes.

The army kept on winning, reported Jonathan in sparse, terse words, but at a fearful cost.

She pined for loving words, for laughs, for happiness. Between the lines she read: the Wehrmacht had been badly mauled. Many fell and did not rise again. Many more were reported missing in action.

"It is impossible to fight with frozen fingers," wrote Jonathan to Mimi. "We're downing their airplanes as fast as they come. Yet we are swamped by numbers. We are retreating in good order, to re-group and counterattack."

Then, mail stopped coming altogether, both from the east and

from the west. But Mimi kept her chin up. War was war; no news was good news; that was her considered opinion.

The harvesting season continued.

The field hands had already stored away the summer's yield when yet more gloomy news began to trickle in: the Führer's war might offer more than winged songs and handsome soldiers to be pelted with red roses. The steppe throbbed with tension. News of disasters in the east kept trickling through the ranks. The war graves were strewn with red leaves.

Neighbors no longer socialized. They looked at one another wordlessly.

The panzers, barrels pointing east, still rolled across the barricades and bulldozed down the walls of frightened peasants' huts, but the plumes of smoke didn't stay. The arches of triumph looked tattered. And with the garlands blowing sadly in the wind, it was impossible to hold parades—the youth squads stayed inside and huddled by the fire. Long gone were the days when the world asked in wonder and awe where, exactly, the Führer would stop.

The baby had not yet grown in its two front teeth when the guns started roaring in earnest.

At first, there was a faint, dull rumble from the east; Natasha started rocking with unarticulated dread. What no one seemed to know at Apanlee, but she felt in her aging bones, was this: in the colossal clash of steel on steel, the Wehrmacht had come to a halt.

"Loose lips sink ships. Be careful, Baba. Will you?" said Mimi.

"One rumor keeps chasing another," Natasha muttered in reply.

There was no need to caution Baba; her loyalties were clear. She had another child to cuddle and to scold. What's that? A little, brittle tooth? Why, cause for celebration! She dabbed her red-rimmed eyes.

Here was another side of the same coin she had observed when she was young in her red summer dress and Hein had tick-

led her with his enormous mustache - if you took life, you paid. She started counting quietly: more trains moved west than east.

There were delays. There was confusion. Vehicles waited, bumper to bumper. Tanks, trucks, jeeps, guns—all movement east was stalled. The field kitchens ran out of food. The victories slowed to a crawl.

Worse yet: the Fatherland was running out of soldiers.

Natasha waited patiently until the family was gathered at the table. Right after grace, she filled her lungs with air. What she would tell them now, not backing down, was treachery.

"If victory is so assured, why throw up barricades?"

The quiet was harder to bear than the noise. The family sat in stiff silence. This silence made Baba break out in a sweat. She whispered in a trembling voice: "Maybe I should start packing now?"

"What counts," said Mimi forcefully, the only one who found her voice, "is final victory."

*"Nu. Nu."*

"Small setbacks do not count. We'll win this war. It can't be otherwise. The Führer knows a way."

Natasha braced herself. "Two years ago, you didn't even know his name. How can you trust him now?"

When the neighbors found out that Natasha had voiced open treason, they ceased to speak to her.

When next the Wehrmacht started requisitioning the horses, Natasha turned into an oracle. She spoke her mind at every opportunity: "Both food and fuel are getting scarce. Should we not pack—"

"If leave we must, it's temporary." Marleen spoke with averted eyes. "One day we will return."

Marleen, as well, was now no longer keen on victory arriving soon if not tomorrow; she often coughed; her eyes were red; but she still rose before the roosters did and worked until the stars came out. She had faith in the Führer. If not today—next

year!

"Sure. Sure. In yet another hundred years, who knows?"

Marleen did not bother replying. Natasha fell silent at last. Her ankles were swelling and aching; there was this and that wrong with her gait. She kept Hein's boots beneath her bed, the ones that kept on squeaking. She sensed that she would need them. It gave her comfort just to know that they were there and ready for her feet. She listened to the steppe wind that kept rattling the gutters and wouldn't let her sleep.

Marleen was feeling poorly, curled up in feather quilts to nurse a cough that wouldn't go away, when Baba entered without knocking. She stood, a haggard shadow, by her bed.

"The horses are rearing, Marleen."

Marleen said in a voice that held no room for contradiction: "I am not in the mood for banter. Get me a cup of strong, good tea. And don't forget—"

This time, Natasha did not save her breath. There was no time for that. Natasha started swaying like an oak tree in the wind. Her heart started pounding like mad.

"*Oh, bozhe moi. Oh, bozhe moi.* Bad medicine. Bad medicine." She fell down by the bed and lay straddled as though she had been flattened. "We're sisters. We're sisters," she wailed.

Marleen had little choice. Marleen knelt next to her and started hoisting her.

"If there's retreat, it's only temporary. If we must leave, we will return. We will be back. Somebody has to stay behind. I trust you fully, Baba. Sleep in my bed, or else behind the pantry. There's still that turnip patch."

"Have you forgotten how I stole for you? How I defended you?" Natasha set her jaw in imitation of Marleen's. She knew that when a German set his jaw, most everything got done. She started hollering.

"I'm better than an ox," she screamed, "I don't need shouts and pokes."

"Natasha, hush! The last, decisive battle is on the drawing

board."

Defiance surged like lava through Natasha. "No! No! That's where you're wrong. You're wrong, Marleen! You're wrong! Your Führer? He's riding the tiger. He cannot dismount."

"I said hush! Hush this minute!"

Between loud hiccups and hot words, Natasha clung to Marleen's ankles. "Maybe he'll set the sky afire, but can he burn the stars? Don't leave me here, Marleen."

"Will you now listen? Listen!"

"No, you! You listen! Listen! Who took the piglet to the market and then reported it as stolen? Who stole your milk from the kolkhoz by adding lots of water?" Natasha would not let herself be calmed. Words came down hot and hard. "I'm coming with you, and that's it!" She was shouting; she thought that her chest would explode. She screamed; she wept; she pleaded until she was hoarse:

"Don't leave me here. I'm coming with you. Hear?"

"You can't. You aren't German, fool. You don't belong in Germany."

"Just clouds and winds outside!" Natasha howled. "Just rain and sleet and snow! The road is full of holes. What of the honey child?"

She started pummeling Marleen. She stopped just short of pulling out her hair, but that day she came close.

"Through thick and thin, I treated you like royalty. Now it's your turn, Marleen."

"No. I said no."

"I found Hein's boots," she wept. "I'll wear them on the road." That was her parting shot. "I'll wear his boots! That's it! Stop arguing, Marleen!"

Natasha was a handful to the last until Marleen fell silent. That day, Natasha won; her heart beat like a hammer, hard; Marleen's grew thick and soft from many valid arguments.

"I'm willing to pay heed—" said Marleen in the end in unrivaled surrender, and Natasha sat down on the edge of the bed and started telling all. "Partisans. Everywhere. Fighting like

wasps."

When word came that retreat was imminent, Natasha was the only one who kept her head in the commotion. She ran towards Marleen, her apron full of half-ripe apples. "Now hurry! Hurry up! If you stay, they will kill you with shovels and butts."

"This house," Marleen said in a voice that still lives on in memory, "was not a flophouse, Baba!"

"Whoever said it was? Brute that I was, I used a special hex—"

"No. No. I tried to overshadow you at every opportunity. This is my punishment." Marleen grabbed Baba by the shoulders. "If I must leave, I will leave an impeccable threshold. Get me a bucket and a rag. And help me scrub! Without another word!"

Natasha scrubbed as she had never scrubbed, her upper lip bathed in sweat. Head down, Natasha scrubbed away, at every crevice, every nook. She'd never really known how large the terrace was, how many steps there were to scrub—but scrub she did, with all her might, right past the blur beneath her lids, right past her triumph, past her sadness. At last, she spoke so softly that the wind tried stealing her last words, but Marleen caught them just in time, and here is what she heard:

"Will you forgive me? Ever? When I was young, I struck to wound your pride—"

For her part, Marleen tried as well: "—I scolded you so many times when you were not deserving of my wrath."

Natasha: "No! It's not your fault. It never was your fault. He came because I wore my flower scarf. I wore my beads. It has been on my conscience all these years. While you, belonging to an extraordinary family—"

"Ah! Now you're telling. Now you're telling. I wondered all these years."

"Well, now you know."

Marleen was weeping, too. "It matters not. It wasn't you. It was his bright red mustache."

"I forgive every cutting remark."

"And I forgive you, too."

"Behind your back, I stole five of your roosters, and I was not entitled to your roosters."

"You did! You say you stole my roosters?"

"I did. Why don't you strike me hard? Here is my head. Hit me. Go right ahead. Hit hard."

"Be quiet. He seduced you with presents and sweets. Your pretty and plump face—" Marleen put both her arms around the servant. Both trembled, shook, and wept. "He should have known. He was a Christian, not a peacock. He had no right to preen before your innocence—"

"I nailed a love spell on the barn door; nobody but a saint could have resisted that."

"Aha! Now you're telling me!"

"That's what you never knew. Hein never had a chance."

That's how that story settled. That was Natasha's final victory; not that it mattered now; there was no time to waste. She found a rope. She broke a switch. She scurried to harness the horse. She ran for extra bedding, pots and pans, an extra pail of sausages, hand-knitted goods, Hein's sheepskin, surely! a jar of rancid oil with which to grease the axles. While rushing to pack everything, she spied Hein's ax: it leaned against the shed, and she would need that ax to chop up kindling wood.

She grabbed it by its sturdy handle. She would need kindling wood. How else to do the laundry? How else to wash the diapers?

She harnessed the mares; she readied the wagon; she piled whatever bedding she could find; she grabbed the child, a mustache of milk on its lips, and hoisted it atop.

Then she climbed up herself.

She settled both her baby and herself in a safe nook atop the swaying wagon where there was barely room for an adult to stretch his legs and spine, said to the horse: *"Pascholl!"* in a firm voice and started creaking westwards.

# Chapter 106

When the long trek took up the struggle with the winds, three women walked away from Apanlee forever, in the direction of the sinking sun. Between them, they carried the baby. They left the grain, unharvested, behind.

The air was light, the knowledge heavy: far better to face hardships now than be damned and lost forever to the Beast.

All three walked with stoic certainty: their loyalties were clear. Yet different was the inner mandate propelling the three women.

Marleen led the procession, with shackled heart, steel fists, and adamant resolve. The teeth of unrelenting suffering were lodged within her flesh, but walk she would, and did, stopping only when night fell and flies stopped feasting on cadavers.

She did what needed to be done, and thought such thoughts as needed to be thought. She loosened her limbs by the fire.

Her world was black and white and never changed its hues. Behind her, Apanlee burst into yellow flames—not for one moment did she hesitate, did she look back. Nobody said the loaded word, but everybody knew: No longer was the outcome *Lebensraum*. It was survival now—survival, base and raw.

The trek wore on, swallowing the roads. It grew longer and fatter, decrepit and sluggish, a slow-moving reptile, a living entity on makeshift wheels that creaked on doggedly in the direction of the Fatherland—women and children, baggage and boxes, carts, lorries and livestock, all streaming like a silent river to the west.

Horse followed horse. Cow followed cow. Smoke trailed behind. The trees started shedding their leaves.

The wind picked up speed.

The baby whimpered softly.

The earth kept burning. A thick blanket of dust hung over the trek. Soon, the entire road was strewn with mattresses and broken furniture. Hamlet by hamlet, their world collapsed in ruins at their backs.

At night, the column halted slowly. The motorcyclists stopped their roar. There might or might not be a meager dinner by the wayside—supping surrounded with bundles and pails. A straw-loaded shack: that was bliss.

Marleen walked stoically. She walked toward the Führer's promise, and he would not fail her. She walked away from Apanlee where, for six generations, her clan had harvested the wheat. Where were her people now? Except for that small handful trekking west, all had vanished, without trace, into the Arctic winter night. She would have perished, too, had not the Führer come.

She walked away from Apanlee with a long whip, urging the animals on. Frost, hunger, enemy fire would come; she would not change; she knew no one who would. Feet raw and soul deformed by decades of brute suffering, she would keep walking, on and on, just walking west, in the direction of the sun that dropped into a gray horizon, making her escape from the bowels of the Beast.

That God was brutal, savage and unfair was not part of her inner litany. Life was reduced to this: great suffering was part of the design. She lived on meager morsels.

Not once did she demand: Why doth Thou wear a mask?" Nobody questioned God's omnipotence, and surely not Marleen. She followed Faith and Führer. The Führer was His helper, for when the Führer came to Apanlee, the land was rich again. There would be victory. When the decisive battles had been fought and won, she would eat all her fill, and still have food left over. The enemy was bleeding from a thousand fearful wounds, and tomorrow the war would be won.

And in the meantime, fortitude.

Her journey to find answers in the worsening disorder was not a murky one. Her God was innocent. It was the Devil who kept tricking people with his schemes. She did not cringe and grovel before God. The Devil piled hardship on hardship.

Before she left, she took the balance of her bludgeoned life with care and without flinching, an orderly and conscientious woman. Here's what she saw as though outlined in sharpened pencil strokes: she had done all that she could.

She had tried to please the Lord. She had tried to please the tsars. She had tried to please her parents and her husband and her children. And now she tried with all her might to please the Führer, too. She owed him all she had. She owed him everything. One sentence summarized it all for her: The Führer stopped the trains. Had he not come with fire, flags and steel, she would have perished. Verily.

The blood drained from her heart in memory.

By the hundreds of thousands, they had perished.

That's why she drove herself. The blind servility this war demanded of all living flesh to higher law and orthodox authority was no alien feeling for Marleen. The Führer gave her certainty. In scrupulous exchange, he did not like to have his wishes crossed. She knew she never would. She lived and died, and never questioned him, nor did she test his gospel. Much like the stone slabs Moses brought to guide the tribe of Israel, her gospel said: Thou shalt, and Thou shalt not.

She felt no discord with a message that came in black on

white, surrounded by a sea of red to script the course of duty. For it was duty that this struggle was about!

Soon there was little left but duty.

In generations past, her people lived by it, and most had died by it. Her Faith was absolute. In its confines, her soul reposed. This was today, containing hardship, but surely tomorrow would bring hope. The earth was still full of potatoes.

"Thy will be done," she said, and did not pause to think which autocrat she meant. A traitor was a traitor. A bullet in his neck!

Who wouldn't have felt likewise, Marleen asked next, as she left Apanlee behind, now walking past the waterhole where, in the ashen years, she and her famished kin had knelt to sink the grain into the inky night so that her family could eat.

So that the world had bread!

In the east, small flashes still, and distant thunder, but in the west, the tree tops stirred. Life, far ahead of her, was tremulous.

The crimson menace, in the east, was growing on the world like cancer, devouring the past that her forebears had loved. Young Germany, by contrast, was waiting in the west.

She was too old, by then, to savor the potential of future progeny, but there was Mimi. Still. A gun hung from her shoulder, tied to a piece of string. There was still Erika, somewhere in Germany. And there was still the baby. The day would come when they would prosper, fall in love, and multiply. And seek their *Lebensraum.*

There was the tree where Hein had marked the bark. Some rusty cartridges still lay among yellowing leaves. She stepped right over them.

Who had been at the core of the destructive, bloody Revolution? Not she.

Had it been Dominik?

She swallowed hard. Not he. He was its tool but not its source. His greed, his envy and his ignorance had goaded him to clench his fist, but he was incidental to the Revolution. She understood that now.

Who sowed the dragons' teeth? Not anyone she knew.

The Jews, said Jonathan, who knew more than she did. The Jews had hatched it, caused it, fueled it, paid for it. To cause dissent, and hence destruction, was part of their self-serving itch.

That's what Marleen believed. That's how it all began for Apanlee—when Hebrews started shrieking of the evils of prosperity and property, while filling their pockets with loot.

As she was leaving Apanlee behind, she saw the grand design. This thing they had unleashed; this monster called the Red Revolution, sprang from the bloody jaws of hell. It fell on good, kind, meek and honest people, who would not have disturbed a swallow that nested in the furrows. It was unleashed on pacifists who had amassed great wealth by watching every kopeck. How could that have been wrong?

She knew that she would live and die and never understand.

Not ever. Never. She would not.

Had not the Revolution come, she would have led a meek and cordial life; she would have kept away from shocking colors, sharp designs such as the swastika. Remembering the blood-soaked night of many years ago that stilled the patter of young feet in the beloved halls of Apanlee, she suffered now as she had suffered when she had tried to gather in her apron the bloody pieces of her kin. She set her jaw. What made her clutch the Führer's flag? Her cherubs, fat with peace!

The Führer said: Help smash the devil's tanks! Set fire to his hamlets! Burn out the vipers' nests!

The Führer clobbered the entire trek with broadcast after broadcast, all letting it be known that there was Hebrew treachery afoot. And when, retreating inch by inch, the Führer took an iron broom and started sweeping mightily the length and width of the Ukraine, she did what any decent human being would have done. She nodded, an obedient woman—she, too, a monarchist at heart. She gave him her support.

"We'll grind the traitors to a pulp between the millstones of righteousness and wrath," the Führer said, and while she did not

clap her hands, she did not turn her face from duty.

Confronted with a common danger, the Führer needed her as part of a united front. It was a harsh and bitter gospel, but had she ever known a gospel that was not?

These thoughts now echoed in the empty chambers of her heart as she bid her farewell to Apanlee. Her horses were already bleeding at the mouth. The thugs would come again and smash the walls that pride of race had built. She knew the Führer, whom she worshipped, the Lord Almighty whom she loved, were fighting side by side, both battling, shield and sword, against the atheistic fiend once more exploding from the gasping heart of Russia and shedding fire from the sky—for now the Jews, the trekkers were informed, were running wild across America as well, and kept on fueling the war, and nothing to stop their endeavors!

The menace of democracy! A fearful scale of crimes! A child knew that Americans were puppets to the Jews. From their soft lips fell the detested word: equality.

She was not ignorant, nor was she pitiless. They, too, would pay. She knew the balance sheet. It would get worse for them. Much worse. Dead people could be found in any war. Young lives entitled to the smell of lilacs in the spring would fall to ashes and to dust because the world was bafflingly oblivious to where the real danger lay—not with the strong and diligent but with the murky, dark and lazy.

Not with her Führer, verily. He longed for peace. Not war.

Marleen thus walked away from Apanlee for good. She turned around but once, for one last look, by the steep bend where the acacias grew and partly covered the old roof that had housed generations.

"Walls, durable enough to last for centuries—" she muttered to herself. In the far distance, she heard the sound of weeping, but her own eyes were dry. She saw the gleaming river of hard work and diligence and piety and passion and deep devotion to the soil—now streaming westwards. Westwards.

She took it in for the last time: the wide-flung wings of Apanlee. The orchards. Silos. Stables.

Here they had lived, the members of the stubborn creed, harmonious in point of view, convinced their world was just. Good, simple people. Pacifists. God-fearing all, obedient all, who flung their seeds into the earth to grow the food for all. And where was their reward?

Equality? She understood equality.

Here was equality for you—to share your work and joy! That needed no translation—and verily not at the point of gun. Foul thought, dressed up in stolen garb, was not equality. The Hebrews could have learned a thing or two from the good maxims of her creed who beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into strong pruning hooks, who held their hard-earned heritage aloft.

As lesser men did not.

Ah, pride of race!

She savored it. The tsars had cultivated it. The elders, to a man, had bolstered it. The Lord Himself approved of it. She knew He did; not anywhere in nature could anybody find equality. She was a simple woman, but atavistically she knew: equality was a political ideal, not a scientific fact.

Equality belonged in the hereafter, but surely not on earth!

The Earth had maxims of its own. The earth craved strength. Hard muscles. Potency. Fertility. Tenacity. Willpower and endurance.

She still remembered how, from his enormous desk at Apanlee, her own beloved Uncle Benny had tried to stem the horror tide of democratic thought with fragile, scented words. And what were the results of his restraint and reason? His hands nailed to the wall?

Her babies, too. Five of her little children. No end to tears and pain. It still washed over her in waves.

The bitter years of anarchy.

Next, civil war. The soil, ablaze with terror.

Famine on top of famine.

The bloody, unrelenting purges. Public tortures. Executions in the market squares. Harvests of executions.

All for equality?

A Jewish lie! A fiendish trick. She wanted none of it. She shuddered at the thought.

There was the waterhole. There she had knelt with her God-fearing sons. The night had swallowed them. The Elders' skulls were toys for the Siberian wolves. Her husband's bones were moldy in his grave.

"I paid," she told the servant who quietly walked beside her.

"You did," Natasha said.

"I paid and paid and paid. The Revolution took from me my all. It took and took and took. Death took a rich, rich harvest."

Natasha's reply was a shuddering sigh. Her jaw started working like mad.

Marleen's eyes became stones on the road. "By sword and by bullet, we perished. Something swept us away like tumbleweed. And to what wicked end?"

It was a riddle with no answer. She knew that words did not stretch wide enough to summarize why tyranny was virtue now, compassion a feature of weakness. God's mandate, muffled like a river—whereas the Führer was alive. And what the Führer said to her was this: "Here is your duty, woman. You do not count. The Fatherland is all."

Marleen put both her trembling arms around the horse's glossy neck, and what she said that day lives on in memory. You hear it still in Winnipeg, in the Dakotas, in Nebraska, deep in the hills of Idaho.

She said with a shuddering sigh:

"Here I was born. Here I was married. Here I gave birth to the future, I thought. Here I lived, and here I loved, and here I buried all. I'm leaving. I am leaving all. Why am I shedding not a single tear?"

"You ask, expecting not an answer," her loyal servant said. Natasha walked beside Marleen, grown black with age, in Hein's old boots, already forming blisters.

# Chapter 107

Alongside the trek, with steady step, walked Mimi. She still was young, still beautiful. She still held all the cards.

"We're gaining on the Antichrist," said Jonathan before he left to finish off the struggle, and she believed him. She believed him. In such a war that treated human life as if it were a bubble, you glittered while you could.

The Wehrmacht moved in waves. The eastern front was pounding like an ocean to save the world from doom. She knew that human sacrifice, all starkly grounded in necessity, was sad but unavoidable. The world would be purged; a new spring would come; of course it would come; and why not?

"By shield and sword," vowed Mimi. The Führer was spectacular from every single angle. In his beloved Reich, where she was heading now, he'd chased the whores away.

She had no inner chaos to be calmed. She knew nobody lukewarm in convictions. She kept cradling hope in her heart. She had her Faith and clung to it, no matter what the outcome.

She had not sworn the oath of sacrifice, as had young men like Jonathan, but well she might have sworn it, for she faithfully

cleaved to the cause. She read the daily bulletins and swore by every one, her heart warm as a patchwork quilt. She would not let her comrades down by yielding to defeatist moods. If there were Doubting Thomases, she was not one of them.

She knew this war was right, a struggle to the death. But necessary. Clean. And just. The generations that had come and gone before she ever saw the sun of rectitude the Führer shone on Apanlee, all had abundant Faith in things essential, clean, and just. They all obeyed without a murmur—be it the Lord, be it the tsars. She had her precedents.

In days gone by, the Elders told her what to do; her parents told her what to do; her brothers told her what to do; then, Comrade Stalin told her what to do, and even Dominik, and she did not demur. Why should she not take orders from the Führer whom she revered and worshipped as she had never worshipped anyone on earth—against the backdrop of the purges that drove Faith underground?

Belief in him was limitless. Faith stood in high relief. It drove her on with a hypnotic force, as it drove Jonathan. Her will was like clay, to be molded.

The mail pouch came daily but his letters did not; the year was running out of days, but it was springtime still for Mimi. She understood this much: that every day could be her last. War wrote the rules for her; she did not quarrel with the rules. She knew no one who did.

She stepped around dead horses, decomposing in the sun. The flies were hatching there.

She ate what she could find—and if she found an apple with a worm, then luck was on her side. She pondered, and then ate it.

She made the most of life. Why be an old, wet blanket?

She walked like a cat, paw after paw, and purred when there was sunshine. She washed when she could. She slept where she fell, but not before spotting yet another gulash cannon, striking up another friendship with the cook.

She was adaptable; she could curl up and close her eyes and

fall asleep beneath most any tree, while the old servant stretched a blanket over sticks to give her child some shade.

Before the rains came in earnest, she found herself a Wehrmacht officer and offered this to him: "I speak High German. Low German. Russian. Ukrainian. I have the body of a boy. I can sneak into any Russian hut and spy out the secrets you need."

They cut her hair and gave her several passwords. She lived without remorse, a gun strapped to her shoulder, but that was not by choice. If it took clandestine means to help clean up the malice of the universe—why, she would gladly do her share, and do it without whining. She was combing the landscape for traitors.

"The good die young," Natasha muttered, ominously, while putting plugs of cotton in the baby's ears. Natasha argued for reality in the battle of words that ensued.

"What of the honey child?" was her repeated cry. The moon came out; the stripped trees looked like ghosts; and Mimi kept on whistling while she walked.

What could she do? She had no choice. Let Baba see she had no choice. She slipped into the peasants' confidence, since she was fluent in their tongue. This was a struggle to the bone; the country blazed in violence; the skies were black with death.

Soon she was cold and wet and hungry, but she did all she could. She radiated confidence.

There was no end to partisans, no end to their hostilities. She took pride in staying hard on their heels, alert for every shadow falling from the trees. If she found a body, she checked every pocket—you never knew what you might find, for edibles were scarce, and flints were valued currency.

The caravan grew long, and thick—and longer still, and thicker. Small tributaries joined the stream from hamlets left and right, with pony carts and high-wheeled baby carriages.

She was glad for Natasha who cradled the child, glad for Marleen who urged on the mares. She stayed close to the trek and had visits as often as lulls in the fighting permitted. But that

was as far as it went. No secrets left her lips.

Legends would later have it otherwise, but she was chaste in her own way, devoted deeply to her comrades, and loyal to the core to Jonathan, who held the enemy at bay with his hard, suntanned body she had so fiercely loved a fading summer's worth. Some *Landsers* gave her languid looks; she would smile sweetly in response and lower her long lashes; all that was play and little more; for in the east stood her beloved to guard the world from doom. Her war was puritanical. She was a *Landser* among *Landsers,* she shared both triumph and defeat. She took her meals with them, right in the ditch, next to the gulash cannon, her mess tin swaying over a slow fire.

To her, this was romance. This was worth. Deeply meaningful.

A cup of good, warm broth, shared with reliant comrades, respecting and protecting her, gave her the energy for yet another day. Here she found understanding and commitment, as deep as life itself.

While she waited, while she hoped the tide of war would turn, a sweet and sentimental song did everything for her. A password, whispered in the dark, passed on from trench to trench, meant everything to her.

She often slept inside the *Landsers'* tents, curled up and cradling to herself her memories of Jonathan. Not one of them reached out for her to try to strip her of her honor. Self-discipline was all. Long after all was said and done and Germany lay quartered like a hare, Mimi would speak of it with an abiding wonder—that brief and wondrous time when life was throbbing, colorful and swift, when words like "duty," "honor," "loyalty" still had the weight of granite.

Her heart was spoken for. She pined for Jonathan. She did love Jonathan.

She kept her pledge with reverence. She knew he strove with all his might to stem the bloody tide about to overrun the trek. Could she do less? His love was intertwined with duty and perfection. Her love was smooth and soft, unblemished. Like a

child's.

This, then, was Mimi during war—not made for motherhood.

She was not good; she was not bad; she was not made for greatness; she wanted warmth and happiness like everybody else. She knew that she might live and die and never own an Easter dress, which, in a normal, ordered world, might well have been her goal.

Her former training as a Pioneer made her superbly fit. She had an expertise her new comrades respected and needed.

Had it not been for Mimi and her adroit maneuvers, the trek would have run into trouble. The caravan depended on her craftiness to supply it with sketches and maps. The partisans were masters at misleading. They misdirected, and then ambushed. Their agents tried to palm off maps with cities that didn't exist, drawing in roads that led into traps. The land was vast. The wind started raking the clouds.

She drew endurance from Natasha and stoicism from Marleen. The twins had taught her to have Faith; the purges taught her to be cunning; the Führer taught her to be valiant and hard.

She could crawl like a snake on her belly.

Her comrades taught her how to stay awake, attentive to the danger of guerrilla infiltration. Someone in the distance shrieked. She didn't even blink. She lived the joy of righteous battle: to be there where the flames were hottest, to die, if need be, where young death counted most.

She sat around the fires with rugged, seasoned warriors, many of them wounded twice or more, listening in silence to their stories—how skilled commandos flushed the partisans from Russian huts, how trenches must be dug and bastions must be raised and bridges must be blown into the air to subdue the ever-more-treacherous foe.

"The Führer cannot lose," her comrades reassured her. "Our planes control the sky."

The enemy, by contrast, had little to show for himself. His aircraft were of inferior quality, decidedly. She squinted to make sure. She watched for foreign planes that kept on menacing the

air. She strained her ears to hear their motors.

"Air bandits in the pay of Jews," her comrades said to her, and acid rose in her, a bitter, cresting wave. How dare her relatives in faraway America! How dare they think and act as though she were the enemy when, all the while, she was the one who fought the pentagram, the Antichrist, still holed up in the Kremlin, showing his black teeth?

The Führer's army, by comparison, was fighting for a warm and pleasant future, where oldsters had a pension and children had a chance. The Führer would help her two little girls grow into exemplary citizens—which was what she believed.

Her spirit has been numb for years until the *Landsers* came. She never knew a *Landser* to be dull. The soldiers told each other daily: "The final blow will end the war. At most, another month."

She could not guess why it delayed, this long-anticipated turn-of-tide, but it was easy to believe in final victory: this city, that bridgehead just around the corner, was slated to become a springboard for the new offensive—and, meanwhile, there was work.

The partisans were pesky and persistent, and had the people on the trek not had her willingness and cunning expertise, life would have been far worse.

Thanks to her vigilance, the trek was never fully at the mercy of the partisans who sat, guns cocked, in the dark bushes, scheming whom they might destroy.

She became the trek's seasoned scout. They had their ways, and she had hers; she snatched up pieces of intelligence much as a chicken picked up kernels, with care, and with precision.

So slim and limber in her movements was Mimi that she could slip right through the tightest barricade.

She helped the Wehrmacht flush subversives and connivers from the dilapidated peasant huts. She fought alongside, quietly, a comrade among comrades, postponing motherhood, as brave and as resilient as her own stunted nature permitted her to be.

Both feet in war. Filled to her fingertips with faith. A young girl still at heart. Faith, here as there. Faith in the Mystic Cross.

"It's for the greater good. That is the only thing that matters," the Führer said, unleashing that dark Faith she carried in her genes. She had been nursed on it.

The explanation was simplicity itself: had not the Antichrist been unleashed on her kin and made her walk knee-deep in blood, she would have lived a prudent life; she would have pleased the relatives.

Like everybody else.

But Mimi never had that luxury. Her memory commenced when she was shedding her first teeth, the year when Apanlee was massacred. There was no way to shake that violent night. She didn't even try.

The blows of anarchy had clubbed the child from her before it was of kindergarten age; the weight of years of pain and misery had crushed her adolescence. The westward caravan was merely a variation on the theme.

The roadside graves increased in numbers—day by day.

The front, though wavering erratically, was struggling to solidify. That Germany would win was a foregone conclusion already.

The shriek of the stukas affirmed it. The smoke plumes—thick, thicker—affirmed it. The tree tops stirred beneath a sky like ink along a dim horizon in the east, like glowing embers in the west. Relief, the Führer's broadcast promised her, was on the way. Expected any minute.

The air was warm; the sky seemed slightly drunk as the leaves curled, changing colors.

It was soft afternoons for days on end, but oddly chilly nights, enhancing the hues of a very blue river, a bright yellow cornfield, affirming that life still was a kaleidoscope for those with eyes to see.

Thus, Mimi walked toward the Fatherland, filled to the brim with Faith, content and competent, her socks, by then, just rags.

# Chapter 108

In spite of the dwindling year, in spite of diminishing stockpiles, there were brief, stolen moments of peace, and sometimes even of mirth.

For instance, one morning Natasha came running, the cook in hot pursuit.

"She did it! She did it! I know that she did it!" he yelled.

She ran for her life, but the cook's legs were longer; his fury made them fly; in the throes of that kind of frenzy, it was wise to step out of his way, which was what Mimi did.

Marleen had not been feeling well all week and now was getting sicker by the day. She lay in the back of her wagon. A stubborn cough was strangling her—the last thing she needed was trouble.

She lifted her head and tried to look stern as Baba dived for cover.

The cook had turned purple rage. He fixed Marleen with steely eyes. "The low-life! The scofflaw! She stole my pail of jam! I'll have her tried and shot!"

Marleen rose on one feeble elbow. "You didn't! No! Natasha!

Not one among us steals!"

Along the length of the trek went a buzz that might have been uneasy laughter. It was no secret any more: that food was getting short. Some confiscated what they could; Natasha had no qualms. Natasha hoarded everything one might describe as edible.

"What's the matter, corporal? What's going on? There's nothing wrong, is there?" asked Mimi. "Why give yourself a stroke? Just ask yourself that question."

He blinked and turned his head, watching Mimi hold onto a lopsided smile.

"I must report this, as you know," he said, already faltering. "She stole it! She's hidden it somewhere. She's hidden my jam. You, there! You answer me! Why don't you answer me? And don't you try to lie, you glutton!"

"Leave my old aunt alone," said Mimi. "She's deaf and dumb. She doesn't hear a thing. She cannot answer you."

"A deaf-mute? That's your lame excuse?"

"Worse. Worse than that. An imbecile," said Mimi, and elbowed Baba gently.

Natasha's jaw began to wobble. She opened her mouth, then snapped it shut again.

"Right. Deaf and dumb," insisted Marleen, too, "since the unlucky day she was born."

The cook was not persuaded. His bushy eyebrows danced. "Is that a fact? Don't give me such a funny look. This calls for an investigation."

"What for? Why waste your time? She stood beneath a tree when lightning struck—"

"—it happened many years ago," embellished Mimi, smiling. She kept on smiling, melting his anger.

He still insisted, crimson. "Theft! It was theft. She stole my pail of jam."

"That's surely an exaggeration," elaborated Mimi, unafraid. She launched another foxy smile: "I have a bright idea. Forget it. As a favor to me?" With that, she offered him a flint. A flint

was now a treasure that could buy bread for days. Would it keep Baba out of serious trouble for having helped herself illegally to Wehrmacht property?

"Yet once again: How many in your wagon?"

"Four," said Marleen, while smoothing out her lie. She counted on her fingers. "My daughter, Mimi. This dimwit here, but useful as an ox. A soldier's infant. Me."

"Where are your documents? Give me details. I need details. I must report the theft."

"I'll scold her, and I'll keep an eye on her. You have my word of honor."

She told them who they were, and why they were trustworthy—three German women and a baby, all of unblemished ancestry. "Give me a pencil," said Marleen, and drew him a family tree.

That evening, Marleen told Baba sternly: "From now on, keep your tongue in check. There is no need to call attention to yourself. Don't speak, no matter what."

"My German," said Natasha, haughtily, "as good as yours, Marleen. I might as well be honest."

That night, they slept, their arms around each other, in an abandoned trolley, to keep the cold away. Between them, they nestled the baby.

A stubborn rash had formed on the child's buttocks and would not go away. Worry nagged Natasha like a worm. She argued, shrieked and wheedled.

But there was little even Mimi could accomplish except heap ridicule on the cook's head because he wouldn't give her extra rations for the baby, despite her pocket full of flints.

No matter how she beamed at him, he wouldn't look at her.

"Just keep your ears stiff," said the cook, without a trace of pity. "That is my best advice. Once we have reached the Fatherland, all of your problems will be solved."

The Fatherland lay in a murky mist. She shushed the baby while she could. She loved it well enough.

"A smile? Give me a smile?" she teased the little waif born from her brief encounter in the sun. She played with it and tried her best to coax it into words, but exhaustion had stolen its voice. Its face was the face of a gnome.

"Don't look at me like that," said Mimi miserable, and stared Natasha down. "I do the best I can."

Natasha kept feeding it jam. She knew the baby needed garden greens, but could she fabricate them from thin air?

The baby needed mothering, but where to look for Mimi? For days on end, Mimi was gone. But once this war was won, she would catch up then. She would. She would learn mothering, she told Natasha many times, once having reached Berlin, where she was heading now. Meanwhile, she had no choice.

The traitors to the Fatherland turned out to be resilient and inventive. They spread defeatist rumors, and not a few of them had gold and silver in their names. They sawed through the beams of bridges. They made the trek detour. They slashed through telephone lines. They strapped small bags of dynamite to dogs and chased them underneath the trek, where it was warm; where the sweet baby tried to nap, snug in Natasha's lap.

Three weeks into the trek, the baby's scalp was raw, his bottom one big sore. As weeks turned into months, with victory nowhere in sight, Mimi grew ever more resourceful.

She was the Wehrmacht's eyes and ears. She helped the trek push on as best she could, and fought against the partisans, wherever they formed pockets of resistance.

To counteract their cunning, she manned the lookout post. She tricked them cleverly. She learned from them their cunning. She toppled hostile cyclists by stringing invisible wire. Odd snipers fired at her now and them from sagging and dilapidated roofs and from abandoned buildings, but she knew how to duck.

"One last decisive push," said Mimi.

The enemy was running out of gas. The trick lay in the timing.

Had she had time to stop and think, she might have hated

them, but hate was not a useful commodity in Mimi's supple mind. Her needs were simple, practical: she wished the bedbugs she endured at night in yet another Russian hut would feed on someone else.

She cocked her ear for danger. She braced herself for ambush. She dug in fast. She kept low to the ground. The partisans shot out of hedges and from bushes.

There was the enemy and there were comrades; things stood in high relief. There was no room for doubt. She had a small and hungry heart; she wanted peace. Love. Warmth. Like everybody else.

"My very own victory garden," she promised, and patted the shriveling child.

She often fantasized. "Perhaps a dainty restaurant, all to myself, with tables with embroidered table cloth?"

The Führer would lend her the money. Four children in four years would neatly cancel it.

Her dreams were all on hold, but dreams she had. In spades. She would nap in warm hay. She would fly freshly laundered clothes in the sun. She would draw cool, clear water from a pump and twice a day water her carrots. She would grow nails again. She would grow out her hair and set it in colorful curlers. She dreamed small, modest, fluttering dreams, bubbling up from a bottomless lake.

Day after day, Natasha barked at her: "You're not fooling me!" which was unfair, and mean. She gave her all, and more. Her children would grow up to have a better, cleaner life than she herself had known.

There was the Antichrist. There was the Mystic Cross. The choice was clear. She knew no one who did not stand in body and in spirit behind the Mystic Cross.

When there was time—though even time was running short—she held the child aloft so it could see the *Landsers.* If fighting there must be, then it was just as well that children learned about it early.

Sometimes she thought of Erika, now safely tucked away in Germany. Natasha missed the puzzling child, but Mimi did not miss her; fate wrote the script for her. This war would strengthen Erika as well and hone her to perfection. Once the war was won, there would be time again for laughter and for song. Which was the bottom line: as soon as there was time, she would start mothering.

So, for a while, war seemed a game. Unreal.

But not for long. That changed.

Once Mimi helped flush several partisans from a thick pile of hay, hands high above their heads. At first she laughed with glee, but then she watched their faces twisting with the knowledge that all they had now left of life was one brief, barked command:

"Here's a shovel. Dig."

She turned her face away. She wasn't made for cruelty, but on the other hand, you paid for what you did.

She gagged a bit when bullets started flying. There were strong penalties against that sort of thing, to prolong agony for captured traitors, but in a war as brutal as this one, and worsening, things could not always be controlled. War did astounding things.

She would have never kicked a dog in anger, or crushed a beetle with her heel, had things been orderly, but as the trek became more desperate, and more and more subversives, who tried to blow the trek sky-high, got their dessert as she was looking on, she didn't lose much sleep.

So ask yourself: God tortures and He kills, how many thousand years? No matter what the misery of life, the cruelty of death, the length it takes to die, the agony involved—Faith can't be killed. It can't.

All cruelties have explanation somewhere, or so the credulous believe. She, Mimi, still believed. She had no malice in her nature. She longed for a safe world, where preachers spoke with fine and measured voices and filled the churches to the brim. Her teeth would ache with longing.

What had she ever known?

Just Revolution. Famine. Anarchy. The purges of the Antichrist. All that.

There was no moral ground beneath her feet at all until the *Landsers* came, their boots and buttons polished. She knew from hearsay that the preachers of the olden days had spent enormous time and energy to nurse believers in their Faith—and many of them dull, old, limited, no intellectual balls of fire. But on God's side, regardless. All that was gone and finished, never to return—that safe and fabled world of yesterday the bandits took from her with bloody blows before she ever had a chance to set a foot in kindergarten.

Had she been sheltered to grow up with warmth and safety and affection, she might have married suitably; she might have raised a family. But she had never known such luxury.

What was another bullet, therefore, against the backdrop of a generation when bullets by the millions flew? The partisans were everywhere. She did not have a matchbox for a brain, nor was she lacking pity. She did the best she could—but not at the expense of sleep.

"Well, we are living in strange times, and anything is possible," she told herself, and watched the traitors fall.

Here was another sort of cruelty in the long string of cruelties that life had handed her. Her memory of life began when she sank her own baby teeth into the tender wrist of a small boy beneath that zinc tub that shook and trembled to the blows of anarchy. He was her husband now, the father of her child. She loved him very much. This was his war. And that was good enough.

On her long trek toward the land described to her as the one place in the entire universe where life was warm and good, she learned to pass beneath the makeshift gallows from which hung black-faced traitors who had done the unspeakable: betrayed the Fatherland.

"A partisan's machine gun nest—" somebody said and pointed with his gun.

In just retaliation, she waited for a favorable breeze before

she put another match to yet another hamlet. A traitor's nest could be reduced to ashes in a jiffy. Compassion? Mercy? Pity? She was not made of stone; she was not cruel by nature. But when she couldn't help what happened, she closed her eyes as tightly as she could and covered both her ears when someone pulled the trigger.

She was the Führer's vassal. She was his follower. It mattered little that this war drained from her kindness and compassion. She could no more give than receive. By year's end, no one could.

# Chapter 109

Why blame the thistle for its fruit? Natasha had forgotten yesterday.

She walked, but did not complain. The tip of the trek showed the way. To save the horses' strength, she seldom rode atop the wagon, though Marleen, who was feverish and getting worse, did so. Natasha walked alongside, bravely, for long, dusty stretches of road.

She was proud of her Apanlee horses, still glossy and calm, sleek with the previous winter's rye. She tried to keep their load light, carrying the baby piggyback or letting it ride on her hip. Only when it needed extra rocking for its nap, or else to help a tardy tooth along, did she climb up to sit amid the boxes, pails and bedding, so she could spy a brook in which to rinse another diaper, riding high, surveying her surroundings with a peasant's crafty eye, soothing the suffering of her beloved infant in her lap.

"Who cuddles you? Who hums to you? As soon as there's a break, I'll make you some hot tea—"

She loved this morsel dearly. She folded her old arms around the child and kept on rocking gently.

She rinsed another diaper. She let the wind blow over it and dry it on a fence. She found a tree that gave sufficient shade and put the baby there on blankets for a nap.

It was still hot at noon; a lot of handkerchiefs appeared; she had one, too—embroidered neatly in one corner, a discard of Marleen's, still practically new. With it, she wiped the salty perspiration off the baby's face.

"—my silly calf? My little kitten? What is the matter now? Don't frown. It's not my fault. Have you been snoozing on your elbow? Who has the softest hair? Who has the prettiest mama?"

Her motives were simplicity itself—she had her family; loyalty to them and to their way of life was now the only loyalty she knew.

Natasha struck an attitude that said: "I am a godsend to the trek." Soon she had quite a reputation.

She picked up many useful clues and applied them as the occasion suited. Food was scarce now, getting scarcer by the hour; each day, she went in search of something edible to fill the can that swung across a fire in the ditch. It was just a tin can, old and dented, scarcely rinsed, but better by a mile than nothing.

She found a heap of abandoned potatoes and ran to get a pillowcase. She spilled them out before Marleen—big, fat potatoes rolling everywhere! Food for another week!

Hers, too, was a world of control. Compliance to authority was in. The tsars could create and destroy. The saints could concede or withhold. What could an old and toothless peasant do against the steely glitter of the Wehrmacht? Never had she wasted time and energy on useless hatred and ill will. The shackles of the gods were ancient fare for her. Nobody questioned power. Nobody questioned rule. Here, as there, were slaves and masters; then as now lived serfs and overlords. Had anything or anybody changed?

All she could see was this: There was no meat in anybody's cabbage soup these days. In fact, if you had cabbage soup at all, you thought you were a king.

Natasha kept a crafty eye on a lame cow that would soon fall and hence yield food for weeks. She would not miss that opportunity.

The trek passed many burnt-out shacks where Russian families had lived, now gone as though they never had existed. The only traces left were brick and mortar stoves.

What Baba found, she kept. She'd knock once and, without waiting, push open any door. If borscht still bubbled in a casserole, as happened now and then—since people fled like hares before the fox at the sound of a motorcycle's roar, all fearing the quick-trigger finger—Natasha seized it as her due and took it to the trek.

She found a make-shift baby carriage amid a pile of rubble. She shouted out her joy. She took possession then and there and knew that she had wrestled yet another chance for that last honey child that life had granted her.

The buggy was a little thing on four strong wheels—wooden wheels, but sturdy—a vehicle that had a handle, like a cross. Triumphantly, she took it to the trek and broke into a chant:

"See what I found? See what I found?"

She placed the child amid the mildewed pillows and started pulling, with dogged, grim determination. West. Past troops that kept on plodding eastward in endless, field-gray columns. Past trucks still loaded high with rifles. Boxes. Ammunition.

She hung another tin can across another ditch. A Red Cross train whisked by and blew the fire out. She kindled it again amid wet, soggy leaves. The skies howled in a wretched voice. Long gone were the raucous Heil Hitlers.

She never called it servitude. She, too, would live and die and never conjure up a world free of submission to command. She leaned into the road, obeying without protest. She headed westwards; they all did; she had no life apart. Their joys were her joys, their sorrows hers as well.

The hours grew shorter. When there was a lull in the trek's

clumsy advance, Natasha rinsed the baby's diapers and dried them on a bush.

At night, she shoved Hein's sheepskin underneath her head and tried to get some sleep, but not before she piled some extra bedding all around Marleen to keep the night away.

As for herself, Hein's sheepskin came in handy. It helped to keep the baby warm, as snug as possible atop her aching chest. All night, she kept it there. Even in troubled sleep, she stroked the tender head.

Another day. She walked. She slept. She hummed.

Whenever she saw opportunities, she scavenged all she could. She gathered birds eggs, berries, mushrooms. In her old palm, she crushed them for the child.

She swallowed her complaints—they did no good. She led the horses by the bridle. In quarrels with Marleen, she always came off badly.

"You smell like an old panhandler," Natasha said defiantly, attempting yet another squabble with Marleen to put some color in her face and hoist her from her gloom.

Marleen let that pass by.

Natasha didn't give up easily. "Your cough is really dreadful. Tomorrow, you'll be dead."

"I know. I'm very sick."

Natasha kept on pointing to the sky: "See that? Those are Americans."

"Yes. Yes, I know."

"Your relatives. Remember how you used to brag about your fanciful Americans?"

"I don't remember. No."

"You would remember if you weren't in the habit of forgetting. You must be getting old—"

Marleen stayed apathetic. Marleen's eyes were veiled, they stared off at nothing. Her feet were raw, with open blisters. She had a stubborn cold. She needed cupping glasses to drain the fever off.

Natasha gnawed her lip. What else to say now that Marleen's

old heart was clearly breaking at mounting evidence of doom, though it was made of steel?

"Some relatives. Some relatives," Natasha kept on needling her in hopes of rousing Marleen back into a fine, defiant mood, but it made little difference. Marleen said bitterly, reflecting the prevailing view: "We cannot count on them. They're in the Hebrews' pay—"

Which was the latest word.

As days grew short and shorter still and clammy nights rose from the earth, Natasha shivered and then shook, but walk she would, and did. The cow and two spare mares trod silently behind.

Her thoughts were her own—thoughts black as a chimney sweep's face at the end of a harrowing day.

Here's what Natasha thought: If it took youth to stop the enemy, why draft a fifty-year-old man? And if the Führer's coffers were full of gold and diamonds, why was there constant havoc with the trains? The Führer claimed in broadcast after broadcast that he would strike a mighty blow, but meanwhile, did he feed his army?

Another day. Another week.

The wagons kept bumping along.

It was impossible to see or say what lay beyond the next day.

The sky turned turquoise, then pale, by mid-November. Each night, the soldiers' tents still stood like pointed hats, but started looking frayed.

At dawn, a chill crept in, and it took hours for the sun to melt it. By noon, wide strips of land lay bordered with wild flowers during these last, sad Indian summer days, but then the skies grew gray, and it started to drizzle.

More petals fell off and turned brown.

Natasha walked where others trod, though walking in the wheel ruts was not easy. Her peasant garb was all she had, and even that was tattered.

There was no doubt Marleen was deathly ill. The moment the trek stopped by yet another rick, she sank down in the straw with a groan. Her legs were trembling with exhaustion, her throat aflame with road dust. All night, she tossed and turned with fever.

Natasha gave her long, hard stares.

Meanwhile, the trek proceeded westwards, on and on—through yellowing forests, over rickety bridges while, on the left and right, deserted villages receded.

Dust rose in clouds behind the wagons. Abandoned, rusted vehicles lay on their sides and blocked the road. Come evening, given yet another makeshift shelter, the people sat around the radio and listened to the news.

" —by Christmas, at the latest—"

Let fools believe that. She did not. She saw what she saw; she knew what she knew. Her eyes were sharp and wary.

The Wehrmacht raided huts. The Wehrmacht was erecting massive barricades. Torn posters, glued to railway cars, to telephone poles, to shabby wind-torn barracks told passersby by day and night that Germany would win. In contrast, by comparison, the wind-blown posters claimed, the Red Army moved sluggishly and inefficiently.

The days grew short. The trek grew longer, wider.

There was no end to people fleeing from the Beast. When others snapped their arms in the salute the Wehrmacht reinforced, Natasha did the same. At night, the people on the trek sat shivering around small mounds of dead and smelly ashes and rubbed their aching feet. That's what Natasha did, for her own legs grew worse. Sharp rays shot from the bottom of her soles straight up into her groin.

What did she want? Not much. Just to sit out another winter by the stove.

Here was the challenge of existence, stripped down to its bare skeleton: to find another box car or an abandoned hay rick for the baby. She had pressing matters to consider: where to get soap to wash her baby's little bottom, already raw with lack of

care, lice nesting where the scabs had formed. Her heart was breaking. Constantly.

The drums were falling silent. One by one by one. The knots of fleeing civilians formed convoys, winding through the treacherous forests where saboteurs and traitors dangled from the trees.

That's where Natasha searched for mushrooms. It took some time and gritted teeth, but it was time and gritted teeth well spent. Beyond the dim horizon, something was growling audibly.

A war widow asked in a pitched and shrill voice: "You keep saying we're winning this war?"

The woman was so shaken by her fate that she could scarcely think. She gloomed and she doomed and complained. She talked from both sides of her mouth. She kept up her complaints. "We've had it. We're losing. We'll all fall in the gutter and die there of hunger and cold—"

Her words were discounted by those who believed. She looked shell-shocked and angry; her face was gray with layers of grime; her skirt was full of holes. Since she was understandably distraught, her own life finished utterly in the debris of Stalingrad, where she had sacrificed four sons, much was forgiven her.

Her husband, she said, weeping, had died earlier.

Nobody paid attention. This woman was no longer willing to avow her duty to the Fatherland, unlike the hardy people on the trek who hailed from Apanlee. They knew that there had been no bottom underneath their feet until the Führer came. This widow had become confused, then stunned, by hardship piled on hardship. Her red-rimmed eyes kept searching for an answer in the marching *Landsers*' faces as though they were insects about to be pinned on a board.

"Look at their boots. In need of heeling—"

"There will be a surprise offensive," said Mimi, who was not made of stone. Just as Marleen forgave the Lord for anything, so Mimi found excuses for the Führer. She made clean sweep of all defeatist arguments. "Hush now! Tomorrow we will win."

"It's all in vain," the widow said aggressively.

"That's nonsense, and you know it."

"It's not."

"You'll see. Just wait and see. We'll catch the enemy off balance. We'll win this war. We will."

The widow had no further words. She merely looked at Mimi, who finally said this, forced out against her will: "It's merely bad rumors, meant to demoralize."

Those rumors had it that the Red Army grew bold. Several *Landsers*, rucksacks packed, had told the people on the trek: "The Führer's generals are plotting. We are temporarily retreating so as to regroup and attack."

She was still gay in spirit. In fact, she was relentlessly upbeat.

It was her duty to defuse defeatist rumors, as dangerous as mines the partisans laid for the trek. Each morning, she counted the enemy's losses. She knew that the Führer was right; the war would be won and the enemy licked; it was merely a matter of waiting.

There was no end to waiting, amid odd, stolen moments of peace.

Life was still wide and full. She thrilled from day to day. The Führer was infallible. His *Stukas* kept on hissing reassuringly, still searching the heavens for prey. His panzer spearheads ripped like scythes through the neglected grain, clearing the way for a better, more honest tomorrow.

And meanwhile, yet another requisition claim drove the last cow, with children hanging howling from its tail, from yet another Russian village to remedy the meat supply. The gulash cannon cook was facing serious shortages.

In a lull, she sat quietly, sunning the baby, in the air the faint scent of cut hay. She loved all dogs, all cats.

"Hey there! Give me a little smile."

It looked like an old, shriveled dwarf. She gave the baby back to Baba, but not before she tickled it a bit.

Reinforcements and resupplies moved east in columns beyond counting. The troops sent from the west to reinforce the front looked young and energetic and undiminished, whereas the ones returning from the front were ashen.

How many had they killed? As many as they could.

They slept with rifles pinned between their bloody stumps. No longer did they banter with each other.

Natasha kept the fire going so some could dry their socks and mittens. While she did that, she kept on chewing on an acorn, silently, to stretch Marleen's slim ration card. She tolerated them; they did not bother her. She kept them in the corner of her eye. They might be cruel and wickedly unmerciful regarding partisans, defeatists, traitors, and marauders, but still they posted guards right by the wind-blown entrance so that the child could sleep.

To have her honey child in clover for yet another night was bliss. Wrapped in Hein's sheepskin to keep the night away, Natasha nestled the infant close to her lurching heart, and slept next to a *Landser*.

One morning, Mimi spoke sharply to Baba who had decided to be quarrelsome: "It's true. Be quiet. The troops have forced a crossing—"

Natasha let that pass.

"I'm telling you it's so!"

Natasha bit her lip. So let them claim whatever suited fancy. Was she born yesterday?

"I know with certainty that victory is just around the corner."

Another day. A week.

The wagons kept bumping along. It was impossible to see what lay beyond.

The silence grew and grew—the only sound the thunder of the many hoofs that kept on clopping west. The trek slogged through another morning, another afternoon and into darkness yet once more till it was time to stop.

The Wehrmacht slipped and stalled. The war moved in deep ruts. The German field artillery lashed out. Its guns kept blazing east. The broadcast told of bloody battles. A lone machine gun cackled in the distance. There was a constant smell of burning in the air.

The gulash kitchen rolled on squeaking wheels alongside the procession. Natasha cried: *"Pascholl!"* and lashed the horse across the flanks, for every densely wooded forest could mean potential ambush.

Why was she given eyes? She saw. She saw with her third eye. At first, it was just dust, but now the mud flew from the spikes. When German *Landsers* came to flood the steppe, end to end, like manna sent from heaven or locusts to devour the grain, depending on your point of view; the Russian hamlets fell like swatted flies; but now the soldiers' coats were frayed. Their boots no longer shone.

She listened with the keenest ear: their motors hummed defeat. A horse fell to its knees. Long, silent columns crept slowly and laboriously through the remainder of the year. The sky turned gray and leaden. The forest in the distance turned pitch black. The drizzle turned to rain. The rain turned into sleet.

Natasha watched but didn't volunteer her thoughts—just rubbed her aching feet.

# Chapter 110

When she was drafted by the Führer to receive a proper education in the Fatherland, Erika had not, at first, quite understood what sacrifice it would entail—to be a cheerful scout, no matter what the cost, and to forget about herself and her own wishes, wants and needs while serving a higher ideal.

Her sense of duty to the Reich had now become her second nature, but she still nursed a small, forbidden dream—to see her family again.

Homesickness for Apanlee burned in her chest like acid. For now, there was no chance to take that trip back home, but once the war was won, once peace was back on earth, her first priority would be to board a train and tell the train conductor: "Apanlee!"

Just mention Apanlee—a fist hit her heart every time. She was starved for the safety of home. Each day, she dreamed of Apanlee and waited for her heart to lift, which always took a while.

The day she left her family behind, she felt her childhood snap and thought it never would be healed. But now she realized that life was not yet over. There was still leeway, still a chance,

the main ingredient being hope. "There's always hope," said Heidi.

All was no longer wild hurrahs; the war was grim and getting worse; the *Landsers* fought and sacrificed; the people hunched and grieved; but Heidi made life bearable.

"One day you'll see them all again," was Heidi's solemn promise, and Erika just clung to that, against the bitter cold that hissed and whistled in the ruins, against the gray, disheveled populace of Germany who daily poured into the bunkers, not even putting on their socks, as soon as the air raid sirens shrieked.

She missed her family. She missed them all, but how she yearned to have Natasha near so she could feel herself rocked gently. She hungered for her Baba. Snug in Natasha's lap, curled up and purring like a kitten, was one of her favorite dreams. Natasha always hectored her for being much too big to snuggle, but when nobody looked, Natasha let her creep into her arms and just curl up and sniff.

Ah. bliss. Natasha smelled like fresh-plowed earth in March.

When no one paid attention, Erika would dare to loiter over smells and sounds and sights and even loving touches, much as an artist lingers over colors. She clung to every one, as though they were her lifeline.

Here's how she dreamed of Baba: Natasha tending to the samovar, which steamed and gurgled in the corner, scenting everything.

Natasha, down on her knees, in front of her icons, beseeching her favorite virgin to speed another miracle.

Natasha wearing Marleen's spectacles when Marleen wasn't looking.

Natasha stood in high relief, whereas the rest of Apanlee was wrapped in gauzy pink.

The baby. Wrinkling when it sneezed. A volley of small sneezes.

Marleen, serene and silent and content, her chair against the wall, her back against the chair to give her spine some rest, now fully reinstated to the virtuous life that pleased both Lord and

tsars.

The neighbors, visiting—thanks to the Führer's master plan, once more united in the well-known maxim, well-tested over centuries, that nothing was achieved without hard work and prayers soaked in Faith.

The *Landsers*—warriors who had come to Apanlee. They drove the Antichrist away. Battalions made of steel. Omnipotent and powerful. Huge boots. Wide smiles. Just roaring by in motorcars, smartly saluting Mimi. The war was made for Mimi. The songs were made for Mimi. She would stop what she was doing, to listen.

The things she, Erika, saw, heard and felt and even tasted on her tongue when she dreamed "Apanlee" were not heroic, patriotic things that had to do with war. No, on the contrary. A practicing patriot knew better, but she could not resist. She dreamed serenity.

All memories that had to do with Apanlee were gentle and benign.

The swallows flitting in the branches of the composed acacia trees. The weeping willows by the pond. The speckled cows. The croaking frogs.

The smell of hay.

Wreaths made of ears of wheat to celebrate the harvests.

All that mixed up, deliciously to make a sumptuous feast, like Heidi's salad greens. All that.

Rich. Complicated. Magical.

A place where order reigned and pride of race was natural and Jesus Christ walked through the fields and blessed the strong, fat kernels.

More than a year had passed since her childhood had vanished along the tracks that all ran backwards, and together, to a point on the horizon, behind which still lay Apanlee. The journey had been full of obstacles, with many stops and dangerous delays because the partisans blew up another bridge or dynamited yet another stretch of track, and many days were spent just wait-

ing down the line.

But everything comes to an end, and so did that difficult trip. Somehow, she made it into Germany, although she lost a mitten while crossing over, through Romania, another evidence that she was running short on luck.

It had been misery! She thought her fingers would drop off. Throughout the remainder of an interminable journey, she had warmed first her right hand, then her left. Even so, her knuckles ached abysmally when finally she reached Berlin and climbed down from the train to stand bewildered on the platform, dirt-spattered, chill and weary, clutching a battered cardboard box that held her few possessions. She was so weak that she could barely stand, but Lilo was there, waiting, and she sprang right into action.

"You must be Erika. Just as I thought. Here. Put both your hands right in my muff. And tell me, exactly, what happened!"

That's how it all began—a brand new life with Lilo in the lead and Erika her shadow, a thin, devoted slave.

Some people talked of sex appeal, and claimed that Lilo had it. Lilo filled every sweater. She swung from boy to boy.

Lilo dreamed up games with kissing as the main objective; she was mad about kissing; possessed by kissing; she snatched her kisses from astonished Hitler Youths barely into the practice of kissing.

"She's a handful," said the neighbors, and gave Heidi pitying glances. Heidi always sighed and said to Lilo: "Why can't you be like Erika?"

"A boy about to sacrifice a limb," was Lilo's forceful argument, "is surely entitled to a kiss. What harm is done? You tell me!"

Intense flirtations with the antagonistic sex were only one of Lilo's many specialties. There were no limits to her energy and verve.

"The only thing I need," said Lilo many times while stroking Winston Churchill, the mutt she loved above all mutts, "is one

good man. And peace." Her eyes shone with mischief and laughter. She counted on her future, sturdily. It lay before her like a sunny, happy morning. She knew which side her bread was buttered on and would let no one spoil her meal.

"Ah, peace!" said Heidi often, too, her blue eyes misting over.

"Silk stockings, Mommie?" Lilo asked.

"A dozen," Heidi promised. "Once peace arrives, you can go shopping early, child, and do it all day long."

"With black seams down my legs," decided Lilo eagerly.

In the interim, she lived within her means. She carefully collected flints, for flints were golden currency. Flints bought you almost anything, above all movie tickets and food scraps for the dog.

She lived full blast, all throttles out. She knew few inhibitions. She had no silly scruples. All Lilo's plans were openly, romantically embellished. She was an altogether enterprising youngster, the railroad station being her preferred romantic hunting ground.

There, Red Cross trains arrived, filled to the seams with wounded *Landsers* who told amazing tales.

"We'll lick the *Bolsheviki* yet, " they said, and Lilo always smiled and winked at them to give them confidence. "No fly escapes their aim," was one of her fond claims.

Everything about a German soldier was confident and powerful, even the wounded ones arriving to recuperate before they were shipped back. Bored silly from long weeks of snailing through the ravaged countryside en route to a clean military hospital, the *Landsers* hoisted Lilo through the window by her arms while Erika stood guard. The brakeman sometimes caught her, took her by the elbow, and steered her back onto the ramp, but Lilo sprang back into action.

She loved to entertain and make the *Landsers* laugh while trading wit and charm for intact cigarette stubs—a teenager of coltish energy, released from hours of clammy confinement, just

bursting with the joy of young life. She looked straight in their eyes and let them read whatever they spelled out.

She was like that. She liked to please. Soon, Erika adored her new friend almost to insanity.

Here was a cheerful scout. Here was an alley cat. No rain, no storm stopped Lilo. She knew a hundred streets and alleys. She visited them all, as soon as the bombers were gone, to see where she could help.

She had a way of striding hatless through the worst of weather, and never mind the old umbrella that Heidi stationed by the door. A frank and winning teenager. Lilo never tired, never slackened. She had her routines pat. Eight minutes was the maximum Lilo needed to shake out her pillow, wash her young face, tame both her braids, and run outside to find a flag to hoist up for another day.

The rubble grew thicker; Lilo sang louder. She blew her trumpet with such force that its sharp blasts sent all the sparrows shrieking to the skies.

The landscape grew ever more studded with crosses, but Lilo was resolved, without apology, that she, for one, would live. She said with two arched brows: "Well, doesn't everybody?"

She, too, had signed the somber clause of sacrifice, if worst should come to worst. She was a genuine patriot that way, resolved to sell herself as dearly as she could, whereas she, Erika still fought down squeamishness; she shrieked at every worm.

"I will survive," said Lilo.

She left no room for doubt. She would fight first, fight to the death, with broomstick once the cartridges were gone. That was her strategy. But once the war was done and victory achieved, one of her plans was to sail to America and ask some pointed questions.

"And their answers had better be good," Lilo said. "Who's offering them more? The Führer? Or the Jews? Sometimes it makes you wonder —"

She did not finish what she meant to say, but you could take

a guess.

The two girls had this conversation after bicycling all day to take part in a songfest at the outskirts of Berlin that had been canceled by a rain of bombs—bombs, bombs and yet more bombs.

Now there were bodies everywhere, and still more ruins, more tears—all of which called for eulogies at which she, Erika, excelled, what with her love for words.

Had it not been for Lilo and her cheerfulness, the Führer's city would have been unbearable, in its grim rubble and cold skeletons of buildings bombed to smithereens, but Lilo never wavered. She headed for the worst. She helped clean up the mess.

There, in the midst of death and destruction, she picked up a vocabulary that, had only Heidi known, would not have been permitted, for people shrieked with anguish as they dug their charred children from the rubble, shouting sentiments that calmer times would have called treasonous.

"This is insanity! Insanity!" the people shrieked, and no one said a word.

When Lilo appeared, the terror receded a little. Somehow, her presence helped. She never grumbled, never tired. She helped where help was needed. She saved her herring coupons stoically, despite relentless hunger pangs, to trade them for a rusty bicycle to expedite her patriotic deeds.

She was proud of her bicycle. She needed it, she said, to help the female postman do the job that any human being hated most—delivering those black-bordered letters.

"There will be final victory," the fifteen-year-old said. "It can't be otherwise. We're right. And they are wrong."

She helped absorb the shock.

She was, by then, a year away from confirmation and, hence, stood straight and tall and beautiful in her cuffed heels two inches from the ground.

Since death was everywhere and everybody talked of it—most of the time with somber resignation—the two girls talked

about it, too.

Death came to some, avoiding others. Death pointed with a bony finger, proclaiming: You and you and you.

Some lived, but many died.

That was the order of the day—life and death intertwined in a macabre, ancient dance. Small groups of chanting children in the streets would draw into tight huddles and tap the sidewalk with their feet:

*"Ladybug, fly!*
*Your daddy might yet die!*
*Your mother comes*
*from Pommernland,*
*and it is burning*
*to the ground—"*

Nobody thought that odd. Most people grieved in silence. Gray people laid their wreaths, with swastikas attached, on the graves of their young sons. They were the lucky ones. Some lost their loved ones, one by one, but had no graves to tend. You lived within your means.

Had it not been for Lilo, who armed herself with sticks and stones to chase away the dogs that always snapped at Erika because she was a foreigner, her first year in the rubble of Berlin would have been worse. Much worse.

She would have been sunk without Lilo.

Now she and Lilo were fast friends. Now they shared everything—their warm, clean bed, their chores, their movie coins, their deepest inner secrets.

If a teacher bored Lilo, she yawned. If an oldster teased Lilo, she winked. She drank when she was thirsty, pretending that water was milk. She ate when she was hungry, pretending frostbitten potatoes were steak.

Soon, she was guiding Erika with a firm hand. She took her everywhere, protecting her, a misfit in more ways than one, against the brattiest bullies.

Lilo gave friendship a new definition by teaching Erika to

spit against the wind. She taught her how to kick a bully in the shins and, for good measure, how to limp convincingly to skip a practice run.

For her part and from gratitude, Erika did not tell anyone that Lilo, on the sly, was smoking flints with several boys while Erika stood guard, her heart in her throat, like a frog.

Lilo feared nothing—not bombings, nor fires, nor thunderstorms, not even the first-period ruler.

When the teacher took that ruler and started rapping knuckles: for this! for that! for letting your thoughts fly out of the window! she, Erika knew all too well that she was being groomed for greater things in life than frilly dreams and lofty thoughts, but still, that ruler stung. Her academic honors file was fat and getting fatter every day, but still, that ruler hurt.

Her eyes would fill with tears and swim with tears long after all was said and done. For it was more than pain. Much more. It had to do with bravery—a quality she lacked.

By contrast, Lilo took all punishment in stride. She just bore down, enduring. Chin up. Teeth clenched. Unblinking.

That was the crucial difference.

Lilo endured, yet saw no need to mend her ways, while Erika tried every which way to hone herself to stalwartness but made no inroads, sadly.

She had arrived from Apanlee a coward, and she was still a coward. She feared most anything, above all else, the bombs.

When yet another bombing raid came to an end and skies were clear again, she found that she could barely breathe—her lungs at the point of explosion, her kneecaps numb, her nose clogged up with tears she did not dare to shed.

By contrast, Lilo only shrugged to demonstrate her nonchalance. She was a jungle creature. She was that sort of girl. She always taunted Erika heartily to blunt her unbecoming fear.

Here's how she taunted fate: "They and their chocolate soldiers? Don't make me laugh! You'd think they'd learn. Well, wouldn't you? There is no reason for that kind of attitude. None.

None at all. There is no way that they can win—as long as we keep polishing our buttons."

She often talked like that, right on the edge of heresy, though Lilo was a sterling patriot, and very pure at heart. She liked to shock; she shocked Heidi by necking in public. The verdict of the neighborhood was this: "God knows, she's up to monkey business."

She put a saucepan on her head and marched right through the rubble, with Winston Churchill on the leash, looking for a fire hydrant.

"Just take your time. No need to rush," she told the waddling mutt, who didn't like the bombings either.

Here was another shameless coward; he tried to hide beneath the couch or else behind the bed. He shook for hours afterwards, and Lilo tried to pacify her pet as best she could by letting him trot next to her once all was said and done, while both set out to find the railroad cook who presided over the turnips and couldn't stop grinning at Lilo.

This was their daily ritual. She helped feed all these refugees that kept on pouring from the trains until it was too dark to see, and afterwards she stood and watched how Winston Churchill feasted on leftover scraps the cook had saved for her.

A fat dog had to eat. She loved that mutt. She fed him everything. When the pork merchants came, she greeted them with outstretched hands, and never mind the stink.

# Chapter 111

How did they survive? By grit and by spittle, that's how. By the thin, piercing cry of the baby. Natasha nestled it, still soothing it, close to her heart. She refused to let raindrops defeat her.

The days of distress didn't end. The war news turned grimmer and grimmer.

When there was time to rest a bit, Natasha rubbed Hein's old, worn boots between her palms to soften the hard leather to help Marleen walk west when she was well enough to walk, which did not happen often. She and Marleen now alternated, wearing them. Streaked rivulets ran down their napes and seeped along their spines. Spokes, wheels and household goods lay broken in the ditch. A wagon rolled down into a ravine. She gave thanks that it wasn't her own.

She started shouting at Marleen: "Loosen the harness. Give the horses more leeway."

Marleen was now so ill she could no longer eat. This left her rations for Natasha who still kept scavenging across the barren acres to find a carrot or potato she could triumphantly bring back.

Ah, luck! Three onions, barely spoiled!

The rain kept falling softly. The road was full of holes. Thick clumps of mud stuck to the spikes. The animals kept straining through the mire. It was an ocean of mud through which the horses heaved.

It happened more and more that Allied forces bombed the trek with little zeal and even less precision. Their nonchalance was odd.

A burst of shells might knock a horse off of its legs, not far from where Natasha stood, but did it hit her? No. It only hit supplies, a waste and shame.

The Allied planes kept coming every day, describing slow circles overhead, moving west to east in tight contrails, like geese—a hundred tiny moving dots in faint relief against a grim, gray, bitterly oppressive sky that lowered on the fleeing.

Few trekkers swallowed their anger. Most people held Americans in low esteem for backing the wrong cause. Why aid the monster in the Kremlin? Why not, instead, lend a brotherly hand and help the righteous win? The Führer fabricated brand new armies with enormous energy and will. He was a wizard, a magician. The tide of war would turn.

The horses steamed. The baby cried. Mud seeped into your boots.

Someone dug another grave. The trek did not slow down.

The clouds grew thick and black. The days grew short and chill.

The rain soon fell in buckets.

A cow howled like a human being. A whip came down. The wind chill increased. A long, gray band on the slippery, silvery road, the trekkers pushed on westwards.

Wheels turned. Days passed.

The war widow sobbed into her coat sleeves.

Romania fell behind.

A cold, clammy wind drove the trek into Poland.

As life became ashen and death became common and dull,

no one stopped to ponder how human hearts begin to harden. It rained on friend and foe alike. It rained and didn't stop.

Natasha kept pushing and pulling, leaning first against this wheel, then that. Her wet clothes stuck to her shoulders. Her toes oozed pus; the poison discolored her feet to the ankles. She took a mixture of fresh horse manure and clay and rubbed it on, relying on some ancient country formula for healing.

In yet another pause, she put her tired head on a carton tied with string and tried to find some rest. "We'll make it yet," she said as softly as she could, and stood again to walk.

Her feet were hurting her like blazes. Her face was gray with pain. A rough wind tore the blanket from her shoulders. The rain came down in sheets. The wind whipped the clouds with sharp needles.

Hard though it might have been, Natasha still believed. Of sorts she did, since Mimi still believed. Marleen believed. The *Landsers* all believed.

The Führer had declared repeatedly: "I'll stand no nonsense from the Allies," and that was good enough. The trekkers still believed; the challenge was to find a fire where you could dry your socks.

Natasha, too, believed. Let's say she half-believed.

She never quite lost hope, thanks to her honey child. When finally the infant fell asleep beneath the rain-sogged bedding, Natasha pulled Marleen behind her by the hand. The road was endless. The rifles were rusting; the cannons didn't fire; the firs kept on dripping; it rained.

Her vision darkened, and the earth spun wildly on its axis, but still Natasha walked and did not say a word; complaining would have sapped from her that last small last shred of energy she knew still lodged somewhere deep within.

All ten of her toes were on fire. The blisters had broken. Hot flames raced from her ankles to her spine. The pain drove the blood from her brain.

She longed for Hein's old boots, but Marleen wore them now whenever she found strength to walk; Natasha had surrendered

them; she even stuffed them tight with newspapers to cushion Marleen's walk.

"Just flesh wounds, that is all," Natasha argued with herself. She knew that if Marleen sat down to pull those boots off her feet, she would not rise again. Her neck glands were hard, red, and ran down to her collar bone— like a small row of cherry pits.

The fires collapsed as the trek pushed on westwards, but the skies remained bright in the east. Natasha asked when out of earshot: "Another month, you say? What if your mother cannot—"

"A month is all we need," insisted Mimi.

If there were added answers to Natasha's urgent questions, she kept them to herself. The Führer, argued Mimi, her voice hoarse with fatigue, was just about to throw the enemy across the river, then drive him back in one bold stroke.

The horses pulled. The clouds shed rain. Each day was one day closer to the beloved Fatherland, where life was warm and dry.

That's how three women and a baby made it through a time which, at its worst, saw animals devour their own excrement as fodder dwindled and finally ran out.

Then rain came in earnest—days and weeks of rain. It rained and didn't stop.

Marleen was struggling air into her lungs and did not say a word. Natasha, too, said nothing. She had her own thoughts to dwell on. An empty goat sty with a roof was better than no roof at all. She was a realist. She spread her blankets there. When Marleen started coughing, Natasha held her by both pointed elbows. She saw Marleen spit blood. Natasha's heart grew thick with premonition.

Natasha had that baby still, to swaddle and to scold.

She was the one who always found that extra dry, warm spot and laid the baby there. Her knees were buckling badly. Her spine was on fire; her old eyes were tearing and dim. Sharp pain

gnawed at the joints of both ankles.

She muttered wretchedly: "A little calf, that's what you are. A squealing little piglet. Here, let me check your diaper. I seem to feel a lump—"

Such was Natasha's world. Her loyalties were locked in place as if a locksmith snapped two handcuffs shut and threw the key away. Who was she but an old, defeated peasant whose only joy in life had been a flowered dish? She, too, hoped hard for a decisive victory. She hoped against all hope.

If her wagon got stuck, she pulled with the strength of an ox.

If somebody trod on her toe, she yelped once, then trod back. She trekked on, west, from village to village. The wagon wheels kept turning. It dizzied her to watch them turn round and round, spokes upon spokes, wheel after wheel. Was there an end to it?

She kept her eyes wide open as chunks of world rushed by. She took it all in without comment.

She raided yet another turnip patch.

She cooked another meager supper in her tin can in a ditch. It was now a challenge to secure most any kinds of edibles, but luckily, somebody always gave her something for the baby.

All day, she walked beside Marleen, whose cough became wild spasms. At night, she spread Hein's sheepskin carefully and put the baby there. If there was opportunity, she changed the straw beneath. If not, then not; the mildewed haulms must do. It drizzled steadily outside. The baby kept on whimpering and wheezing.

Natasha knew that winter lay in wait, much like a hungry Beast. She thought her heart would crack.

No matter how far the trek managed to move, the horizon kept ever retreating. Kilometer piled on kilometer. Wheel rolled after wheel. The air was thick and clammy. Huge rain clouds drifted through the sky. The skies were wet. The world was wet: the clouds, the trees, the asphalt.

Natasha watched the baby with sad tenderness. She was an expert at survival; she held the child aloft; the soldiers pointed

with their guns, still smoking.

Another transit camp. Another burned-out church. Perhaps some empty barracks. The infant was her ticket now for any sort of liberty; the ghosts moved aside to share warmth.

There was no kerosene to light a lamp. Natasha crept inside and started pushing for the sheltered corners. Someone had already built a fire; people had bedded children, oldsters, wounded soldiers on the stairs, along benches, underneath tables, along the staircase steps. Trekkers sat around the fire until the flames stopped leaping in the ashes.

Natasha looked around. Soft weeping came from a corner, someone had lost a relative. That was bad luck, bad medicine. Natasha fussed about the flames; it would not eat the sodden twigs. The wind kept on blowing it out.

At intervals, she checked the baby fearfully: beneath those rags, still life?

She munched dried bread crusts for her birdie. She fed it soft mush from her lips.

No matter what, she hung onto her pail of jam, although the handle numbed her fingers. She had procured it by a miracle. It kept the child alive. She fed it spoonful after spoonful; it was her iron ration. She often sat on it to make sure no one stole it, while Mimi disappeared into the night to elbow for a spot at yet another kitchen queue. The net result, unfortunately, was often just a cup of boiling water.

"—who cuddles you? Who hums to you? Who teaches you to smile?"

Long after everybody else lay motionless in an exhausted stupor, Natasha sat as close to warmth as she could sit, to thaw the baby out, until the lice revived.

Out of the corner of her smarting eyes, Natasha kept on watching Mimi, who looked like a panhandler, smelled like a tramp, shook with revulsion and horror, but trekked on through the mud, useful in many small ways.

The trek would have perished without her.

She knew the partisans were closing in. She helped delay, mislead, and trick them. The saboteurs were pests, pale shadows within wet, stripped, dripping forests. They flitted through patches of mist, firing from dugouts and from abandoned shacks, mining the fields and ripping up tracks, pouring sand into the gas tanks of the Wehrmacht. The woods were full of partisans.

"Hands up!" the soldiers shouted, and saboteurs did as they were told. If they were caught, they stood waiting; their fate was to be hanged or shot.

That, too. She witnessed it. She never quite stopped being squeamish about hangings, but she drew resolve from the partisan's vicious asides. They were an unrepentant lot. They sneered before the noose was thrown, before the bullets flew:

"This war, as good as lost."

The Wehrmacht made short shrift.

She saw one cross himself with three thin, trembling fingers before he suddenly disgraced himself and stained his uniform.

"The pig!" somebody said and spit. She was both sad and mad. She struggled down her panic. She leaned against the tree, glad for the rain that helped to hide the clammy perspiration that formed on his drawn face.

If you betrayed the cause, you paid.

Her heart grew numb but calm, as distant, cold and peaceful as the moon that still shone, stealthily, the moment it stopped raining. His head was hanging on his chest. The woods were dripping wet. She tried to light a cigarette, but it was wet: the wind was wet; her hands were wet; the light was blown out every time. She shut both eyes and waited. The rest was blurry rain.

That night, like many other nights, she tried to find sleep in the crook of her stiffening elbow, which always took a while.

In an attempt to undermine the people's Faith, the Allied planes kept dropping leaflets by the thousands.

"This war is lost and will end in defeat for Germany," the Hebrew leaflets claimed. The messages came fluttering down

from the drizzling sky in gaudy, brazen colors.

Few people picked them up, for it was said the paper might be poisoned. Dark puddles formed around them. The trek rolled over them.

At intervals, the sun came out.

If luck was on Natasha's side, she rinsed the baby's diapers. She let the cold, wet wind blow over them and waited patiently, flat on her belly, low, so as to be on guard against the bloody partisans who shot out of hedges and bushes.

She clutched the honey child and walked. She pulled one leg behind her, favoring the other. Her ankle was swollen. Her toes were open blisters.

"As soon as we manage a lull in the war," said Mimi, "I'll get you some ointment. I will."

And she was as good as her word. She still had amazing resources. She even marshaled heated cotton strips one evening by sharing a flint with the ambulance driver.

But all that helped little; Natasha kept dragging her foot, catching up with her luck, heading west. All that was left for an old peasant now was flapping soles through puddles and mire and mud, having fully surrendered her heart to the mewling and pitiful voice.

It was a dreadful year. Natasha did her share by being silent and enduring. She did not waste her strength.

All with feet kept walking westward; everything with wheels kept rolling westward; therefore, she did, too.

The trek staggered west as though it were a badly wounded reptile, clearing hurdle upon hurdle, and somehow, night by night, by yet another miracle, Natasha found an empty barracks or an abandoned trolley car to put the baby there.

She squatted in the darkness, massaging the soles of her feet. She still had strength—more strength than most who walked.

The strong kept walking, their bundles in tow. The strong would survive, for they wouldn't let go. The old and the weak dropped behind.

They fell by the side of the road, where they died of exposure and hunger. Natasha kept hauling Marleen to her feet, out of the rain-sodden bedding.

"Several horses have sickened and died," said Natasha.

"Your mother's body, like an oven," cried Natasha, clutching Mimi in a hammer lock.

"I am as prepared to kill as to die," was Mimi's desperate reply, her coat just rags and tatters.

Beside the trek walked Mimi. The rain streamed down her ashen face and disappeared inside her collar. She, too, kept trekking west, along an endless road that started with darkness and ended with darkness. On through the monotonous drizzle!

She was covered with mud, head to toe. Her face was drawn into a frozen mask; her mind was numb with cold and misery, but yet she walked; she walked.

"The Führer still knows ways to unnerve the enemy," insisted Mimi.

"How far yet? Mimi? And how long?"

Who knew the answers to those question? She just kept fiddling in her pockets for a flint. The effort drove beads of sweat onto her upper lip.

The land of hope and glory, insisted Mimi, who knew more than an old and worthless peasant did, with almost no reserves of youth to spare, lay just around the corner. What could Natasha say? Natasha cuffed her hard, which was her privilege. "You fool! The cartridges are wet."

But Mimi simply ducked.

So let Natasha doubt the outcome of this war; she trusted the Führer as ever. He kept sending forward brand new troops; he kept fueling the war effort; if one soldier fell, three rushed to fill the gap.

"Just two more weeks," she said, and leaned into the rain to stand in yet another queue in yet another wet and dripping town, clutching her ration card.

Mimi fought bitterly, with gritted teeth but adamant resolve. At her back, there lay the growling front; in front of her, the winter—and high above, the howling iron birds, still strafing the unraveling, disheveled trek with their casual, blistering guns! Prime targets were the trains. The trains, still moving both provisions and munitions to the front, ran sluggishly and often stalled on broken, bombed-out rails. The enemy, the radio said, was suffering appalling losses. The Führer's generals feuded.

What else to do but fight? Fight back as best you could?

That's what she did. She fought. She was a *Landser* among *Landsers.* There was no other choice. You had to pry them from their guns. She backed them up; she fought with every ounce of strength left in her slim, hard, boyish body.

"Three weeks, and not an extra day," insisted Mimi.

Large rain drops ran along her spine, collecting in a small, chill puddle in the hollow of her back. She leaned for warmth against the belly of a horse. She watched the Wehrmacht chaplain stagger by, carrying a goat, its legs already stiffening. Two tears rolled down his cheek.

She watched him stealthily. He had no idea what sort of a woman she was. She heard him moan: "How canst Thou hesitate to grant us such a tiny favor?" She watched the man of God until he fell and did not rise again. She moved cautiously closer to check. His eyes were still open but empty. The goat he had carried was stirring. She took a loaded carbine from a handy corpse already lying in the ditch, at peace forevermore, and blasted a hole in the animal's head.

There, now!

She dragged it by its hind legs, right through the muck and mire, right past a guard who mumbled something to himself, pretending not to see.

Food for another week!

Word came at last: the Soviet Army would be stopped, thrown back across the river by October. And not a day too soon!

"If that's not true, my name is Schorsch," shrieked Mimi who

hadn't slept for days, who knew the Wehrmacht was invincible, but it was difficult to keep your dignity while sloshing through the mud.

With care, Natasha moved her toes. Her feet were gangrenous.

"Say something. Please," wept Mimi.

Natasha only shrugged and tended to her blisters. She carefully unwrapped the strips of cotton she had not washed in weeks. What else was there to say she hadn't said before? She was no longer human. She was part of the caterpillar trek on iron feet—an insect moving silently through darkened streets, through village after village.

Jeeps, cannons, trucks of every size and make moved in the opposite direction. The horses were covered with sweat. The roads became rivers of mud. The trees shed leaves until all leaves were gone.

The trek struggled on without stopping.

Natasha muttered to herself: "After November—what?" December? January?

The air was growing teeth. It bit as it entered the nose. Natasha stared along that endless road, heart pounding, out of breath. She knew that it led to nowhere.

The trek kept swaying helplessly—gray bark on a huge sea of gray. Behind her and in front of her, several animals died in their traces. Her old feet sank into the mire. The swastika trailed in the mud. Natasha kept dragging her axe. The baby whimpered weakly. The cook had no potatoes. It rained and didn't stop.

# Chapter 112

"Pretend you have come home," urged Heidi that first afternoon when Erika stepped off the train, and ran to put the kettle on.

Before the day was out, she was as good as family. The three of them sat on the couch, Heidi left and Lilo right, and even Winston Churchill had stopped growling and was sweeping the floor with his tail.

Lilo, at her expansive best: "Here. Have another slice of coffee cake."

"Oh, please. The crust. The crust will do," begged Erika, to honor her Apanlee manners.

"No, silly. Take the middle. That's where the jam collects." urged Lilo, more than generous, and the exhausted traveler out of the wastes of Russia knew then and there that she had found a sturdy hook on which to hang her heart.

Right at the start, each opened her heart wide and let each other in, and now they were fast friends. Now she and Lilo shared everything, except what was in Lilo's bottom drawer.

That was the only secret left, but Lilo hinted now and then

that, given time and opportunity, that, too, would be revealed.

Each night, before they fell asleep, the two girls talked at length about the future and its possibilities, full of romantic yearning. This was their favorite activity, snug in their feather quilts, arms and legs intertwined to share each other's warmth, now that the coal allowance had run out, and spring was not yet in sight.

"Lilo?"

"Yes?"

"Are you asleep?"

"Not yet. What do you want?"

"Let's talk a little bit."

"All right. You start."

"When I grow up, I'll help make Germany the focal point of culture," said Erika, an ardent patriot.

"I'll have a dozen babies, all pooping in their diapers," said Lilo. Divining peacetime dividends was one of Lilo's specialties. "I'm very keen on marriage."

A legless man could hug. An armless man could dance. The war moved toward victory; the Führer's generals kept masterminding everything, but intact men were rare.

Then what? What did two lovers do?

For updates on romantic matters, the teenagers went into oft-repeated huddles. Hushed hints helped a bit, but not enough. When it came to that mystery, she, Erika, was at a loss—hopelessly backwards, uninformed, virginal, squeamish.

"You take your clothes off? Everything?"

"No doubt about that. None," said Lilo knowingly, and gave a gentle elbow poke, then added with some passion: "Some things just make me boil. I am no friend of the barbarians, but even our mailman is female."

"Oh, that," said Erika with nonchalance, while having no idea.

She still had miles to go. Her ignorance was staggering. Unless she was alone, and even pulled the shutters, to strip down to the skin was not easy, what with the Führer watching her from the old dressertop with sharp and steely eyes.

"If you don't understand it, you can't do it," said Lilo next,

and gave Winston Churchill a smack, thus hinting there was more. "It has to do with sleeping in the raw."

That by itself was sinister enough. "Can you be more specific? What are the rules?"

"Well. One of them is that you're not—no matter what!—to put the cart before the horse. Although I must admit: when those embraces on the screen are heating up, I'm in agony. Remember the last movie?"

These things were dizzying. These things were vague and hazy, mysterious and slightly frightening, as undecided as the gender of an unborn child.

It was called love, said Heidi. A special kind of love, and wondrous beyond words.

All that lay in a hazy future, still full of dreams, all waiting to be plucked.

Lilo swore her to lifelong secrecy one day and told her some, but not enough. The rest was in the dresser, well under lock and key.

"It's part of growing up. It's part of womanhood. The rest comes by itself."

Erika turned pink with alarm. There were times when her jaw fell open! "You wouldn't want a baby out of wedlock, would you?" she asked in a hoarse whisper, hoping for additional detail.

"Why, heavens no! The very thought! Whoever would? It has to do with practicing the art of love, see? As the saying goes."

"And?"

"Oh, hush. Now go to sleep. You're still a baby! Goodness!"

All that was heavy fare for Erika, who was as shy as she was green, but Lilo was a master teacher who teased and taunted her until both burst out laughing. She was magnificent with things that verged on the forbidden; she didn't stop at anything; she didn't wait for opportunities; she helped her fate along.

She kicked the tires, checked the springs, and took off on her bicycle in search of romantic adventure, her two braids flying in

the wind. She knew her way around Berlin; soon she was teaching Erika. She was amazingly informed; she knew most every detail about love; much more than she let on. When pressed, she even said: "Boys have an extra bone," and even Winston Churchill was all ears.

"Well, out with it," squawked Erika, but Lilo remained mum.

In self-defense, Erika would deck herself in dreams as though they were raw diamonds. She lay, flush with the fever warmth of Lilo, took a deep breath, and shared a special dream.

"I think I'll postpone love. I will be lit on celluloid," she said, astounding Lilo with another vivid image.

"A pity you aren't prettier," said Lilo, who was practical.

"Don't say that, Lilo. Please. I will be rich and famous."

"The size of your ears bothers me."

"Well! Isn't that exaggerated?"

"It's not. And your diphthongs are simply appalling."

"I'm trying, Lilo. Truly."

She was, and she was making headway. The past was one gray sea of homesickness; the present was still difficult, since faults and imperfections of all sorts surrounded her like a transparent wall, but thanks to Führer, Faith and Fatherland, she had a future now. Between her fingers, she kneaded the edge of her pillow. She lowered her voice to a whisper. "If I just put my mind to it, there's nothing I can't do."

That's what the teacher said, who knew most everything. The future would be bigger, better, richer than anybody could imagine, the spinster teacher said, her pallid life as good as over.

Most teachers talked like that.

"All I want for the next ten years is enough food to fill my belly," said Lilo, leaning on one elbow, suddenly, while peering in Erika's face.

"Me, too."

"Why do you want to be an actress? You could be an usher, you know? Ushers have lots of power. They collect flints to give you the best seats."

"I want to have a make-up mirror all my own." For Lilo,

mirrors held no mystery; they helped her squeeze a pimple. But Erika was different. Complex. She sighed and lost herself in several additional seconds of bliss. In her dreams, she was mentally sunning herself. In her dreams, she grew prettier and prettier.

Lilo gave her a withering look before she blew out the candle:

"Pah! I want two of everything. And I will get it, too. Now I am telling you for the last time: Just hush and go to sleep!"

That, too, was easier said than done. Finding sleep was exhausting and taxing. Lilo sprawled and hogged the blankets; Churchill snored and belched and worse; but demons sat in wait with fine, sharp, pointed teeth for Erika. It was an exercise in will to talk them into corners. It helped to visualize the war's end, overdue, the things a girl might do when all the bombing stopped, but there were bad and wrenching nights when nothing made a difference. The air was full of rumors.

For instance, rumor had it things were going badly for the Führer, particularly on the eastern front. "In the name of God-Amen," the war preachers said.

A question rose and swelled. "Lilo? Are you asleep?"

"Almost. What now?"

"When do you think we'll win this war?"

From deep within her feather quilt came Lilo's muffled voice. "Herr Hitler will decide that."

You could tell by the way that she battled the blankets when something angered her. And she was angry now. She could afford to show her wrath; nobody challenged Lilo; nobody doubted she was bold and brave and utterly devoid of fear when bombs started falling like hail.

"It's just so stupid to get killed, that's all," said Lilo suddenly with vehemence. "What if we start losing? Then what?"

Huge waves of fear kept pounding Erika until she was aching all over.

It was in the air. It came through the chimney. It fell with the bombs from the sky.

The Soviet Army was advancing, if you believed the refugees—a monster with a million feet, stalking the fleeing flesh. The refugees that flooded every street were ample testimony to the fact that victory was not a matter of mere will. When yet another batch of refugees arrived, they trembled as they told: "The Reds are closing in."

They kept on pouring daily into the rubble of Berlin. They claimed that the front was in flames, that the Reds ripped holes in the Wehrmacht's defense and tore the front wide open.

"Lilo?"

"Again?"

"Please. Don't you—

"I said don't you start acting up again! Stop being foolish, Erika. Listen to how Winston Churchill snores."

So Erika revealed no more, but the terror within had the wings of a bat. She remembered the stories her grandmother told. She knew the Fiend. She knew the Antichrist: he planted infants' heads on window sills as though they were geraniums.

She kept tossing and twisting and turning, her throat like sandpaper. Fear was to be mastered, like swimming. The things she sensed, deep down, were too unspeakable for words.

The worst that could happen would happen. Unless the Wehrmacht won. The Wehrmacht had to win. There was no other way.

She rolled herself into a ball and closed her eyes and started counting backwards: "Ninety-nine, ninety-eight, ninety-seven . . . "

"Erika?"

"What? Ninety-six. Ninety-five—"

Lilo, who hardly ever went to church, said suddenly: "I swear by God and all the saints, I'm ready for most anything." She was trembling with fever and longing. "I want a full-fledged bridegroom. With a luxurious set of whiskers. With all his limbs. With nothing missing. Nothing. Not even a small fingertip. "

"Me, too," said Erika.

Things were bad, though—bad now, and getting worse. The walls started wobbling; the glass flew every which way; a neighbor ran along the street, scorched slippers on his feet, his nightshirt torn and ripped. Tress snapped as though a rubber band had been released and toppled them. A horse lay on its back, its stumps up in the air.

Not even Winston Churchill, Lilo's obliging mutt, considered himself safe when the bullying Americans arrived and dropped out of the clouds. The moment when the sky began to hum, the canine cowered, whimpering, at Lilo's feet, his tail flush with the floor.

Lilo put both arms around him. She loved him well enough and more, launching into robust washerwoman's lingo while holding his head in a vice with her knees.

"Hell! Christ Almighty! There they are! Stop snorting, Winston Churchill! Where are your manners, may I ask? We have raids every day; what's there to get excited?"

That was her style. That's how she lived, a comrade of the deepest dye, unflinching, unafraid—while day by day and week by week, the bombers roared above and death dropped from their bellies.

The Amis were intent on blowing every shred of young and hopeful life still stirring in the rubble of Berlin to bloody smithereens. "No matter what, keep smiling," was Lilo's sage advice, but, sick with shame, she, Erika, would lose it then and there and hunch and just start whimpering. It was a nightmare, day by day; she almost died with shame; her good friend, Lilo, was dumbfounded by her depth of cowardice! She was so scared and so ashamed of her own fear that perspiration trickled down her nose, collecting on her chin. When she behaved like that, Heidi reached for the castor oil.

"What sort of people do they think we are?" said Heidi, too, while dabbing her red nose and eyes. "No, honey, no! Don't throw up now! It's quite all right. Another fifteen minutes."

Each second, an eternity! She was so terrified of being hit and being blown to pulp by bombs that in the middle of the night,

while she and Lilo lay in bed, pressed to each other like sardines, now that the rain storms howled through every crack and crevice, she made the bed frame rattle with her fear.

Her kind of fear was as repulsive as blood was on a chicken bone, but in the grip of terror, did she care? She couldn't help herself!

Heidi knew many recipes to make the coupons stretch, but still it was a struggle. The war was almost six years old; no coals left for the stoves; no peas left for the pot. But Heidi took three shriveled turnips, mixed them with mashed potato peels and presto! One more lunch!

"We're all in this together, girls," said Heidi many times, and even Winston Churchill cocked his ears and nodded his consent.

While Erika was growing tall and lanky—despite her homesickness and other maladies, she shot up that first year in Germany as though a soft, warm rain had fallen on her body—Heidi let out several seams and even traded staple coupons for a fine velvet Sunday outfit, used but as good as new, the height of luxury, to spruce her up a bit. The dress was blue, with snowy lace around the collar.

Erika paid Heidi back in kind by being best in class. She was a first-rate pupil. Her notebooks, always orderly. Her grammar, near perfection.

"There is potential here," this teacher said to Heidi while standing on one leg. The other was in Russia.

"I know that. I knew that from the start."

"Your foster child has quality. She's made for leadership."

"She comes from a good family."

Ah, balm. Those were the times when words came by themselves. This teacher, teaching Racial Science, was Erika's decided favorite because he stated, in straight strokes of pen lined up like obedient soldiers, that Erika was notable—which, when it came to words describing Apanlee, was not a big surprise.

She spoke and wrote of Apanlee, the place that racial pride had built, not ever running out of thoughts, though often out of

ink and paper. If she had wanted to, she could have raised her hand and answered every question when it came to her kith and kin. But she left room for Lilo, who needed credits, too—albeit more in math than in the softer sciences.

Lilo did not care one whit if she confused percentages with decimals. She was superbly practical; no store clerk dared shortweigh her rations. She was better at hiking than reading—twice in a row, she had been voted patrol leader. The previous summer, Lilo had even led a labor youth commando, now that most every farm hand had been drafted from the fields to help speed victory. She had helped gladly, filling in the gaps the men had left behind, bringing in the farmers' hay and helping them harvest their apples.

She was at the front in every practice march. She drilled as if she were a boy, with gritted teeth and stiffened spine, and won her stars and ribbons in hikes and special sports events. She posed for the photographers. Such things were made for Lilo.

In summary, she was the Führer's pride and joy. She was superbly brave. Poor Erika—who kept on tripping over Winston Churchill. Her inability to harmonize her left foot with her right plagued her, like a decided stammer.

She knew the Führer stamped his foot with rage when he heard of a youngster who did not march as bravely as the rest, but her two lungs were small and cramped. Besides, she lost the cadence easily—she was forced to step out of line and sit down by the road to regroup. It was only after Lilo showed her how to limp convincingly to get out of an all-day practice march that she gained a small measure of relief.

And she had other failings.

She tried to cock a gun, but only squashed her thumb. She grew so hoarse from shouting songs of victory that she could barely speak.

In summary, life was a test for Erika. The drone of aircraft never stopped; the bombs destroyed most everything; the streetcars had no lights; the people had no food; the teacher had

no pencils; a window shattered, then another, and you swept up the broken glass. It was sheer misery.

Not so for Lilo, though. She was all Erika aspired to be. She never counted bombs, no matter how they whistled, no matter where they fell, whereas she, Erika, kept counting, counting, counting. It was a weird compulsion that had its origins in cowardice—the vice that made all other vices pale. She could not help herself.

But Lilo? Lilo laughed—and off they went, she and her mutt, a saucepan on her head, one of her many ways of demonstrating nonchalance. No matter how severe the carpet bombing, as soon as it was done, Lilo shook the dust and mortar from her hair, went for a rope to tie to Winston Churchill's collar and started walking him right through the smoking rubble, right through the havoc and destruction.

Those two made a fine pair. She took him everywhere. He was the love of Lilo's life, majestic and complacent. That was no ankle-snapper! Those two strolled through the showers of mortar and death, and Erika, who, nowhere near as brave, knew that she had no choice but to grit tooth on tooth and do the same, kept begging, out of breath:

"Wait! Not so fast! Please. Not so fast! I'm losing my left heel!"

"I don't like being slowed down. I like to move. That's all."

That was how Lilo lived. On her own terms. Impatient and extravagant. There was no limit to her energy and verve. She walked on the balls of her feet.

"Before the lackeys of the Jews ruined everything, Berlin was quite a city! Quite a city!" said Lilo at such times, and urged the dog to lift a leg and help himself to bounteous relief, while watching with the liveliest interest when the high moment came.

# Chapter 113

Natasha put foot in front of foot. She scarcely knew how. Sharp rays of pain kept racing to her groin. The wood was damp. The axe was dull. The fire wouldn't burn. The wagons were tilting this way and that.

She sensed, more than she saw, that troop replacements kept on plodding east in endless silent columns. She started saluting; she didn't know why. She kept hoping her feet would hold out.

Out of the Fatherland came daily hopeful bulletins. "The end of war is near," the radio proclaimed. The Führer and his generals were arguing about the exact timing.

The trekkers devoured such news. They knew that all the world stood poised, on tiptoes practically, while waiting for the last decisive battle. By mail and messenger came word: "We're winning! We're winning. The Lord is on our side."

And high time, too. The food supply was running out even for the fighting forces; reserves were being steadily exhausted. To find a flint was bliss, because flints could be traded for rations. Food coupons were dearer than gold.

One lucky day, the sun shone briefly through the clouds—

and down on Mimi, rich as Croesus! The cook had saved an extra crust for her, along with both heels of a sausage.

"Here. Here you go. That ought to put some color in your cheeks," she told the pallid infant.

The child stared back at her expressionless. Natasha took the crust and softened it with spittle. "How long yet?" she asked softly, appeasing her own hunger. The baby started munching listlessly. The air reeked of wet ashes.

"Two weeks. Three, at the most," said Mimi.

What was a little lie to boost the trek's morale? "We'll win this war," lied Mimi.

All the reports from the front were the same. The *Landsers* attacked as never before. The blood ran from their wounds. Each one of them, a hero! The Wehrmacht tore holes in the Soviet defenses. The enemy was being driven back, but with appalling losses.

Weary hearts started pounding with hope.

Somebody in a wagon far ahead broke into a victorious ballad, singing incessantly and in a mad and ringing voice.

Nobody else took up the chant. It rained and didn't stop.

There was a faint growling beyond the horizon nobody could explain, until, by special envoy, word finally arrived that the Red Army was a bear, but he was losing, claw by claw. The Wehrmacht ripped them out.

The soldiers of fresh regiments, all young—and getting younger with every new replacement—all pledged to blind obedience, all plodding east, swore to the people on the trek that's what the roaring meant: the bear had now been cornered. These soldier youngsters, young enough to forego shaves, said to the struggling refugees: "This war is duty. This is honor. The Führer is refining wonder weapons."

They were the best the Fatherland sent forth. They were a fearless tribe. They said repeatedly they would ignore the rumbling in the distance, the gathering darkness, the ominous sky.

"The Führer has at last revealed a secret plan," they claimed,

"to sink the British Isles."

The people nodded, and why not? Draft dodgers were worse than coyotes.

Luck showed the way yet one more time to an abandoned shelter where someone had already built a fire.

Natasha limped inside; she favored her right foot, the left hurt fearfully. As she pulled off her shoes, two toenails came off with the rags.

She bore down hard and did not say a word—if she ignored the fire in her ankles, then it would go away. She had to walk; there was no choice; if she did not, who would?

Day after day, Natasha walked, an old and wounded animal.

Her feet were living coals. She longed for Hein's big boots Marleen still wore, although there was no way, by then, for Marleen to keep up, not even in Hein's boots. She rode atop the wagon. She had no strength left any more to pull off Hein's old boots.

Natasha heaved. Natasha pushed. Her toes were numb, her ankles stiff with age. The infant stirred next to Marleen, though it looked like a doll without joints.

Marleen was deathly ill—so ill she muttered gibberish, she wasn't rational, and Baba tried to help, but it was not enough.

A turnip. A potato.

She knew what Marleen needed: a warm, thick feather bed, hot tea, two dozen cupping glasses on her back to draw the fever out.

Another week? A month?

The horses dragging guns were skinny to the point of vanishing. The stream of people on the road was thickening. The earth was crusting more and more with frost. The trains ran sluggishly and stalled before the craters the partisans had dug.

The guns still thundered without pause, blasting eastward mightily.

But where, Natasha asked, was victory?

Where were the promised wonder weapons? Where others

saw the medals, she saw the soldier's empty sleeve. She was nobody's fool.

Natasha foraged fiercely. Whatever she might find, still edible, she took back to the trek. She had her axe; she cut a hole. Across it, she lay two forked sticks. She lit a match with numb, arthritic fingers. She tried to heat some water in a can.

The field-grey throng kept pushing by, still in the opposite direction, still heading for the front. The clouds hung low and heavy. Small crystals started floating from the sky.

Devoid of food and short on sleep, Natasha nonetheless coaxed, scolded and cajoled Marleen, whose strength was fading fast.

"Here's food. Now eat. Don't give me your excuses."

Marleen stared straight ahead, red flecks on both her cheeks. Her voice was faint. Her fever rose. She couldn't keep anything down.

By night, she was delirious. It was a chore to get her up each morning.

"Among us, we don't quit," Natasha begged. At night, she wrapped her arms around the infant, who drooled and shook and moaned.

"—three weeks, and not a day more," insisted Mimi.

She talked like that while hunger kept on whistling through her thoughts. She might be weary to the bone, but she had hope to share.

"We need clear sunshine—that's all!—so we can use binoculars and watch the riverbanks. The enemy will lick his wounds. Here. Mother! Take my ration card."

"No. No. Just keep it for yourself."

"Now, Mother! Listen! Listen carefully! Don't give up now. We're almost there. A final push will do it—"

Guerillas still hid in the woods. They kept derailing trains. They slashed key telephone lines. They set fire to bundles of food.

They spread defeatist rumors. They sawed through the beams

of the bridges that permitted the front to fall backward, to regroup for counter-attacks. Another partisan was caught and speedily dispatched into the afterlife, leaving behind him a blast of strong curses. Another fierce rainstorm was brewing.

Natasha saw a match flare up and saw that it was Mimi, who hugged herself for warmth. Natasha watched the baby's ashen lips. She probed the infant's mouth with her own thumb and finger—by now, it should be teething in the back. The gums were pale and flat.

She checked: Your little heart, still beating? Her own was breaking constantly. "Yet one more week," said Mimi.

Faith was now all she had. But that, she told herself, was really all she needed. The war had to be won. She suffered, and did not complain. She had the Führer's word.

And in the meantime, fortutude.

She helped the Hitler Youth dig trenches and fell trees to fashion barricades. "In a forced choice between two evils," said Mimi, "you chose the lesser one." She shook with raw revulsion at the injustice as she kept struggling, day by day, first through the pouring rain, soon through the drifting snow, across the bodies of the people who had fallen.

"We'll win this war," said Mimi.

The road did not diminish. The winds did not let up. The radio kept on spewing bulletins. The front mail was delayed; no word for months from Jonathan! The casualty lists were appalling.

The war was grim and bloodstained business, but when the bombs hit somewhere else—she, Mimi, felt relieved. In just a few more days, the *Landsers* would see victory, although the Soviet Army might be hard to beat, despite a string of unexpected victories the *Landsers* had achieved.

She, too, was counting on America. There was some talk of indirect alliances. Could be America would join the Führer finally. The enemy would be thrown back. The Führer would yet work another miracle. America was perched on the cusp—or so

some people said. At night, she curled against a stranger to share some extra warmth and dreamed of Jonathan who, in the past, had painted many times, in warm, caressing words, the tranquil life in Germany.

She often dreamed of that—the street where Heidi lived.

She saw it with her inner eye: the house with its wide picket fence, its spotless window panes, the shed where Heidi kept her tools, the red tile roof, the carrot patch—now under tons of snow, no doubt, but waiting to be tilled.

The kitchen, warm and spotless.

Thus, Mimi dreamed: once she reached Germany, she would enjoy a lavish breakfast in the morning, the baby in her lap and Erika across from her—quiet, quaint and orderly.

She would find out what puzzled Erika. She would catch up with her truncated motherhood.

The trek ground to a halt.

Natasha's glance returned from distances no longer of this world. Her fingers had gone dead already; her toes were stiff, her feet blue to the ankles.

"When, finally? In yet another hundred years?" asked Baba.

She talked like that, an inch away from treason. What little she had learned about Americans was not enouraging.

You couldn't rush Americans. They never seemed to hurry, no matter the emergency. She still remembered all the weeks and months it took to stop the horrid famine that snuffed out life at Apanlee as though a thumb snuffed candles. Americans were tardy, then. They took their own sweet time. Would it be different this time?

Fools might believe that. She did not. A locomotive had been hit by strafing Allied planes; the train was sitting there, right in the middle of the road; she had seen that in passing.

As soon as she could stand again, she would check every train car, just to make sure—there might be food inside.

"Before Advent," said Mimi, lifting a trembling chin. "By Christmas, at the latest."

By yet another miracle, Natasha huddled near somebody's fire and strung a line between two chairs to dry a burlap diaper there. The burlap didn't dry. She put it on the baby, wet. The baby was a patient child, tardy in almost everything.

Wrapped in a chill, wet blanket, Marleen sat, doubled over, gagging.

The moon rose over bare tree tops. The cold rushed in and started biting. The infant shivered with each blast.

The night thickened. The war did not let up.

Death kept on plucking people from the trek all through the night until dawn broke again.

Small puffs of smoke marked the position of the trek as it rolled on in silence—on through the rubble of the bombed-out cities, across shell-cratered fields, through bombed-out trenches, past empty barracks, air raid shelters, abandoned and dilapidated schools. A caterpillar with a million legs, it kept on swallowing kilometers.

A curtain of silence descended.

A sentry moved, tensing with every shadow that fell from the stiffening trees.

Never had word spread so quickly: the clash between the east and west was imminent! All afternoon, it flew from cart to cart: unfortunate misunderstandings between the Führer and the enemy would now be straightened out! The news kept on cascading out of Mimi, while tears of joy streamed down her face—that peace was finally in sight! With shaking hands she tried to light a cigarette as she relayed the news that now, at last, the Allies realized that the true enemy was not the Führer and his *Landsers* but the Beast, the Antichrist out of the Bible, advancing on them with a devilish roar!

"Not yet too late," muttered Marleen, delirious, and tried to drag herself yet one more time away from death that would not even yield a grave! A ditch at best—snow piling up on her!

For days, she had lain in the back of the wet, jolting wagon,

amid pillows and blankets, still sodden with rain. She flapped her arms with great joy when word came with explosive force that the Allies were struggling to meet her.

*"Pascholl! Pascholl!"* even Natasha shouted, energized, great bolts of lightning flashing through her mind. She waved her arms at the airplanes above, urging the animals on.

Far better late than never!

For a brief moment, wild with hope down to her aching toes and bursting heels, Natasha, too, believed. Ah, she believed! Who would not have believed? The planes were flying very high and very, very fast. With every single ounce of strength committed to the road, Natasha grabbed Marleen by her thin shoulders and started shaking her:

"I said walk! Walk or die! We're almost there. Now walk! Don't give me your excuses!"

"I can't!"

Natasha would't have it. She gave her a decisive shove. Here was the best news yet—the Allies were reaching the borders!

With her last strength, Marleen struggled to meet them halfway—in Hein's old leather boots, feet wrapped in Führer slogans.

# Chapter 114

For many people, the mailman had become the messenger of sorrow, but Erika kept hope alive, for she had little else.

Let there be war—mail came on time, even on Saturdays. It came in thick, gray pouches.

"No. I am sorry. Not today," the lady mailman said.

"Maybe tomorrow," Lilo smiled, and Erika gave Heidi a quick glance to have that forecast verified, but Heidi dropped her gaze.

"It takes a while," said Heidi at long last. Her hands lay folded in her lap. She never spoke a falsehood. If she had nothing positive to say, she just kept her opinions to herself. Her words were sweet and patient. Her hair had lost its sheen and now was streaked with gray. The war had made her pale and thin, and there were moments, chilling moments, when Heidi seemed to lose her bearings—when she walked by a neighbor child who sat forlornly, weeping—not even noticing, her eyes as blind as those of newborn kittens.

Three sons were fighting at the front, dispatching every Bolshevik to hell. It had been months since she had heard from them. The front had swallowed them. The postcards she re-

ceived from Jonathan, still fighting bravely in his trench to stem the vicious tide, were now her single joy.

The Reich was shrinking daily. The war dragged on and on.

Other people's food was more than meager by the fall of 1944, which stretched into the coldest winter in a century, but thanks to Heidi's ingenuity, she and the girls survived the worst.

For months on end, the snow lay hard and glittering on the blasted rooftops of Berlin, and there was very little food for anyone; you filled your stomach up with water. It was a cold and hungry time, as bitter as gray salt, but Heidi saw to it that the tinsel came out when Christmas time drew near.

A tiny fir tree sat in a bucket in the corner, decorated with sparse ornaments, artfully fashioned from bits of brittle straw.

*Silent night. Holy night.*

*All is still. All is quiet.*

The kitchen became scented and smelled of candle wax. The three of them, alone, with Winston Churchill flattened on the faded rug and making snorting noises, sang softly to each other.

"Next month, maybe" said Lilo, hugging Heidi awkwardly, but Heidi wrapped herself in silence.

Thus, Christmas came and went, and Heidi didn't crack. The reports from the front were upbeat. Some valiant *Landsers* perished, sadly, but lavish were the wreaths.

"We'll win this war," said Heidi to her neighbors. "It can't be otherwise. Our country is still strong."

The bulletins were clear: the Wehrmacht was approaching final victory. The world to come would be a better world, a safer world, transformed according to design, cast in mold according to a master plan that made allowances for losses.

If he should fall, wrote Jonathan with stiffened fingers, a comrade would be there and cover him with the belowed flag. Those were his precise words.

The neighbors nodded in resigned, small silences. The city had become an icy tomb, but somehow, life went on.

Gray people climbed forth from their cellars.

Black-bordered lists were published daily in the papers and posted in the stores. That was the page that Heidi turned to first, before she even washed the night out of her eyes and stacked the kindling wood.

It was her daily ritual—to check the *Missing Landsers List.* She ran her fingers down the rows of names while hoping against hope. And if she saw a name she recognized, she sighed, put on her overcoat, and went to pay a visit to the grieving.

Berlin became a city without men. Invisible conveyer belts took old and young and put them all in uniform. Lilo's shoes were in need of re-soling, but even the asthmatic cobbler was gone.

The butcher was drafted, the tailor, the timid greengrocer—a soft, pale bachelor who lived in a chill attic flat with seven goldfish and three cats. Before he disappeared around the corner with water in his lungs but valor in his heart, he gave his pets to Heidi. Now Heidi had more mouths to feed, without more ration cards.

"What biceps, man! What biceps!" said Lilo, full of charity, well out of earshot of her mother, while bidding him good-bye.

His neck flushed crimson at the compliment. He stuttered timidly: "You think so? Do you? Really?" He had known Lilo since her head reached barely to his knees and she came toddling to his door to beg the last, sweet apples of the season.

"Why, surely! Absolutely. I swear it on my grave, man!" lied Lilo, and gave him a nudge with her elbow.

He confessed in a quavering voice: "I didn't think they'd come for me, what with my health certificate. I need a *sitzbad*, girls, no less than twice a week. Why, I was never so astounded in my life."

In answer, Lilo merely winked and smiled a wicked smile, both hands behind her back. She smiled and kept on smiling, a veteran of war, to give an old man confidence. To keep her out of mischief, claimed Heidi, was harder than guarding a basket of sparrows. There was nobody equal Lilo's in energy and drive,

and every Hitler Youth stared at her sweater, whereas they never stared at Erika in that odd, strange, disturbing way. They only pulled her earlobe.

"You look magnificent," said Lilo to the bashful grocer. "Be sure to hold your horses."

It was her sixteenth year, and she was beautiful. Her hair was shingled properly, her stomach hard and flat. "Why, look at you! I never saw a finer *Landser*. That is the honest truth." She gave him her most wicked grin. She told him to bolster his valor: "I'll write you a letter each week. If you don't mind, that is."

"You will?"

"Of course I will. It can get very rough. You better do yourself a favor and stay out of harm's way. Many stories are making the rounds."

He had his slogans pat. "We're fighting for a better world. I'm sure we'll win this war."

"One can be sure and wrong," said Lilo suddenly. "One can be right and lose. That's just my own opinion."

Erika stared at a crack in the sidewalk. She tugged her sweater out of shape, distressed at Lilo's words.

Had she been Lilo and not Erika, she would have quoted duty. Truth. Humility. Self-sacrifice. She would have quoted honor. She knew that Lilo often said one thing and meant another, and you could never tell. The grocer knew that, too. He started pulling at his whiskers.

"Well, in that case, I guess—I guess I better go. So. How about a little kiss? A little goodbye kiss?"

"Why, heavens! No!"

"Why not?"

"My mother is very old-fashioned," said Lilo, while striking a seducer's pose, thus softening the blow.

The grocer looked at Lilo with two old, wounded eyes. "Who would find out?"

"Most anybody could."

He had a powerful imagination. "Give me a little peck. I'll probably get shot. With my luck, that will happen."

But Lilo was firm, though she never stopped smiling. She kept smiling to bolster his pride. "No, no. I better not. Most anybody could find out. And if they did, then I would be the scandal of Berlin."

It wasn't even a rebuff, for Lilo smiled at him in such a way that you could tell she wouldn't mind, were it not for the scandal.

He shifted, timorous, from leg to leg, a red spot on each cheek. He also wore different socks. He made one last attempt.

"When I am dead, you will regret this, Lilo. Come on. Right on my schmoozer here."

But Lilo smiled despite her negativity and shook her head so that her tresses flew, to let him know that she had gone as far as she would go in giving an old man a strong shot of self-confidence. And now both stood there, awkward suddenly, and looking at their shoes.

"Besides, I don't like to be hurried," said Lilo, and gave him a small swat. "Don't you agree that's clever?"

"What on earth am I going to do?" he said and shivered in his trousers, and suddenly his eyes were watery—and Lilo's, swimming too. His voice quavered. He rubbed his wobbling chin, as though he were testing his beard. "This is crazy! I am practically into my pension!"

She spoke in a soft, gentle voice while stroking Winston Churchill's sleek, wet nose with a small, tender finger. "You must howl with the wolves, don't you know?"

"That's what I always say."

"If you ask me," said Lilo now, while kicking at a dirty snowball, "it's mostly attitude. No need to press your luck. Just stay out of harm's way. I'll save you a handful of flints."

The grocer nodded at her sagely. "That goes both ways. Be careful, girls. Watch out."

"We will."

"Well. Off I go. May we all meet again, and in a better world." He fished deep in frayed pockets, coming up with a handful of change. "Here, girls. Go have yourselves a treat."

He was known as a tightwad; the gesture was appreciated.

Lilo curtsied to show her excitement. "Why, thanks! Oh, thanks!"

"I didn't really mean a word of it," the grocer called while looking back. "About that kiss, I mean."

"I know. I know. I didn't hear a word," called Lilo after him.

She smiled and kept on smiling, tears criss-crossing her cheeks.

The movies in the war's last year were highly educational. The Wehrmacht was scrubbing the world of corruption in drawn-out, snow-clogged battles. The *Landsers* were magnificent, exploding bridges in the rear and overcoming every obstacle by their intelligence and cunning, and everybody knew there were no finer soldiers.

The teenagers leaned back to savor the well-known. The movie houses of Berlin were dank and murky places, but warm, much warmer than outside where wind and sleet increased.

First came the specials—extremely political, all offering closed, airtight arguments. The prelude made you laugh out loud about the ways the Führer closed the night clubs, drove every crook into the sea, and chased the usurers and whores away to make the Fatherland the focal point of culture. These specials sorted black from white. You strove to learn from them. The Führer set the moral boundaries and fought to keep them there.

To wit: the Allies always lost, the Wehrmacht always won.

The enemy was wooden and predictable. The Russkis? Rags and tatters. The Tommies smirked while splashing soap across the room, fanatics about cleanliness. The French had lisps and strange diseases and came across effeminate in words as well as deeds. Americans were swaggering, chewed gum and made a fetish of equality, their shirts hanging outside their trousers. Their roads were straight as arrows, while their values were twisted and warped. They were the patsies of the Jews, who talked with silver tongues.

That was the gravest charge: Americans, trusting and gulli-

ble as children. They took enormous pride in fighting other people's wars, thus filling Hebrew coffers. If they kept on their foolish course, their world would grow darker and meaner. That was the message. Everywhere. Inside the cozy movie house or out in the cold streets. You couldn't hide from it.

The radio bellowed daily: "Death to the Hebrew lackeys!" but many people did not feel that way about Americans at all; in fact, they liked Americans, though all agreed: were it not for Hebrews' villainously laundering their brains, by now the Führer would have won. Bringing the Amis to their senses wasn't easy.

"Do you suppose that before long—"

"Why, heavens! Lord in Heaven. Shhh! Be quiet, for heaven's sakes," hissed Lilo angrily and pushed somebody's arm away that fell across her shoulders.

Next came the main event—Zarah Leander, finally, an actress to her fingertips and toes, a superb illusionist, as gifted as they come. Around her quiet serenity, no one searched ruins for firewood and food. She didn't move an eyelash, didn't blink, was not a bit disheveled ever and certainly did not complain and brood, although the world around her flew apart, demoralizing everyone with hardship upon hardship.

"The day will come when I will look like that and move like that and talk like that," said Erika. "You'll see. That day will come. Say what you will. It will."

"Be realistic, dear," said Lilo, unconvinced.

That was her favorite refrain. Be realistic, Erika!

"Laugh all you want."

"Besides, you're much too thin, if you ask me. You need illegal butter." Lilo didn't mention malnutrition; that would have been defeatist.

War movies with romance built-in were Lilo's favorite films. The kind she liked to watch—where a fat moon shone on a silver lake while gentle music played—sent all her energies atop a fluffy cloud and kept them there for hours. She savored every one of them, especially the ending—Zarah Leander reclining on a pebbled beach, while knitting someone's socks, content and peace-

ful as a kitten, smiling that perfect smile. She knew the fate awaiting her unless she showed that she was unafraid. She helped. She sacrificed. She was superbly brave.

You followed her example.

Unless you followed her example, the Reds would come and flood the city of Berlin and kick you—kick you dead. And then step on your bloated belly. That's what the Russkis did. The Russkis must be stopped.

# Chapter 115

The bodies of the fallen *Landsers* were shipped back to the Reich in gunny sacks. The Wehrmacht still had gunny sacks, though freezing people stole them shamelessly and hid them in their wagons.

Natasha had her own; the baby was inside. The baby looked just like an old and withered dwarf. It had no voice. It barely moved. Sleet glued its eyelids shut.

Before another week was gone, it lost a thumb to frostbite.

A hut. Whose hut? No matter.

Natasha pushed inside. Blessed were the times when she could spy a fire. A *Landser*, curled up by the door in his torn soldier coat, his rifle at the ready against the partisans, was eyeing her with tired eyes. She paid no heed. War was war—but a baby a baby. She still had hers. She held the child aloft.

He stared at it. Beneath those rags, still life?

She had no wish but one: to keep the morsel warm. It whimpered faintly, seeking comfort on Natasha's aching shoulder where the strap of her backpack, in which she still carried her axe, had cut a painful ridge.

She found a frozen quilt. She shook it, wrapped the baby, but when she saw how badly Marleen shook in the periodic gusts of wind that blew through the glassless windows, she gave the quilt to her and opened her own bosom to thaw the baby there.

"My little calf. Here are my withered arms. As good as any cradle—"

The baby kept licking its lips. Its face was shrunken. Ancient. Natasha watched how bands of lice moved up and down its neck where she had tied a shawl to keep the warmth inside. She squashed a few. No matter, honey child. No matter.

She looked around. Someone had already burned the furniture and half the floorboards, too; Natasha was eyeing the rafters. The room was like an ice cave. Her jam would not thaw out.

Across from her, in a dark corner, hunched several refugees around a battery-powered radio.

"—for the righteous, there's glory in death. The front will stabilize—" The night resounded with the raucous voice. The guard by the door started cheering.

As soon as it was thawed sufficiently, Natasha put the baby down and buttoned up her coat to search the ruins for firewood and food.

Whenever she was sent to scavenge food or fuel, she found that someone had already been where she was looking now, with little left that might have been of use.

Starved children dug through compost heaps to find some strips of meat still clinging to a bone. Hunched shadows stood in queues and waited for their rations while standing in the icy drizzle, just waiting—waiting wordlessly.

Each evening, long queues of hungry, freezing people snaked around corner upon corner, beginning at the fuming barracks and winding around blocks. The baby wheezed. The trees moaned wretchedly. The Führer was still winning, but at a fearful cost.

If there were bedbugs to endure, she stolidly endured them.

She squashed them when she could. The child was all. Beside its needs, all other worries paled.

Huge potholes swallowed tanks. The wind howled, shouted, hissed and wept. Natasha listened fearfully and heard how eternity roared. The child in the crook of her arm was still stirring.

She muttered, for habit was habit: "Who cuddles you? Who hums to you?"

The stars shone as brightly as ever.

Day after day, it was the same: somehow, Natasha always found another make-shift shelter in an abandoned row of barracks.

She knew that she was lucky; persistence had paid off. She reined in the horses. She took possession of the building. In its sad ruins lay strewn a dozen dead civilians. She stepped right over them.

There was no one to stop her now. Not now! By God and all the saints, not now!

She looked around. A direct hit had flattened the building in the middle, but both ends still stood firm. Her head was pounding like a hammer; her back was on fire; her eyes were red and raw. She had that axe, still in her backpack; it came in handy now; she chopped some firewood to warm another night; she kept the matches dry, between her withered breasts.

There was Marleen, now barely sensible.

There was still Mimi, fighting the guerrillas.

The mine dogs were the worst. Seeking warmth beneath the trek, next to the steaming horses, repeatedly the animals, explosives strapped onto their backs, blew portions of the trek to smithereens. The Wehrmacht did its best to stop the treachery; it made nooses from telephone wires. Caught saboteurs were dangling from the trees. The trek passed underneath.

For days on end, still in her soldier's uniform, Mimi sat faithfully within the moaning woods with loaded carbine on her knees, a chill within her heart—a soldier among soldiers.

She was the Wehrmacht's eyes and ears. They needed her. The trek would have perished without her.

She watched young regiments tramp by. They swung their arms against the cold and smiled with stiffened lips. False cheer was better than no cheer. She smiled back every time. At every opportunity, the soldiers sent to finish off the war deserved a smile. Wherever the trek stopped, young boys were standing in the howling wind, still in their summer uniform, all waiting to be processed. She let them know she knew: it was just as cold on the enemy's side. The eagle's claws still clutched the Hooked Cross, and she, for one, believed. She did her part by spreading cheer as though it were soft butter.

She carried marching maps, read directions from frost-bitten stars. So far as she could see, the Führer rode the tide. He kept on replacing the guns that were lost. Additional weapons were being developed and refined.

Odd fires kept on flaring in the east, still sparking rumor after rumor. Those rumors drove the trek. It snowed. It sleeted. It blew. The news from the disintegrating front was more and more disheartening, but the Führer had promised his troops: "We are now at the cusp—" and Mimi still believed.

At night, she put her head upon her aching elbow, curled up against a stranger to share a bit of warmth and tried to get some sleep.

She did not ask herself: "How will it end?" She knew she would survive.

Why was she spared when thousands died each day? Because her cause was just.

"Sure. Sure. In yet another century, who knows? It's dogfight after dogfight, right?"

Natasha talked like that.

The bunion on Natasha's big toe hurt, and her tongue was as vicious as ever. She didn't care what anybody thought; she did not beg for death, but neither did she beg for life; she fashioned an alcove for cooking.

"Yet one more month," insisted Mimi. She squared her shoulders and stiffened her back. "Another month. Two at the most—"

Her nerves were near the breaking point. She was leaning on hope, against rumors. She, too, was dirt-bespattered head to toe and gray and chill and weary. She hugged herself against the night. She shook but didn't cry.

Natasha hugged herself as well and did not waste her strength on a dumb wish that came from a fool's paradise and ended in the ditch.

The *Landsers* were retracing the routes by which they had advanced. The rumors that the eastern front had given way were ceaseless.

Over the cracking, moaning earth rolled the expatriates in numbers beyond counting, behind them the Antichrist's army.

The Wehrmacht still dealt crushing blows, but unmistakably, the front was now retreating, riding roughshod over everything that moved. The convoy grew longer and longer. The cook was gone; so was his gulash cannon. Natasha cut meat from the horses' cadavers. Even horsemeat was hard to come by; horse rations were dearer than gold.

She had the axe; it came in handy; she used it where she could, hacking meat from dead, frozen horses.

It was, by then, so cold the Wehrmacht's shadow trembled.

Natasha stomped her feet and blew her breath against the palsy of her fingers. She was luckier than most; she still had two mares, although their heads drooped low for want of fodder; their hooves left bloody footprints in the snow.

Nobody said a word.

From the debris of battles fought and lost arrived in scores bemedaled but exhausted cripples, with bloody rags around their stumps—grave, silent shadows clinging to the running boards of trains. Broken vehicles and shell-scarred tanks kept slowing down the trek.

Still, Baba walked. Amazingly, she walked.

Long convoys of prisoners of war moved alongside her at times, five to a row, tied to each other by thick ropes. Their coats were torn, their faces gray. They slept in frozen clothes, for fear they would be stolen. Survivors of a quarter century of violence, not feeling loyalty to either friend or foe, they stomped the ground and flung their arms about to keep the blood from hardening with cold.

Natasha knew that winter lay in wait, much like a hungry animal.

The horses started buckling at the knees. Natasha pushed and pulled. Marleen kept on swinging a switch from behind, now that she could no longer walk at all and had to ride atop her wagon.

"*Pascholl!*" both yelled. "*Pascholl!*"

They kept yelling it until they were hoarse. Another battle was expected soon that would reverse the war.

Natasha walked beside the trek, a black pack animal, still lugging her belongings—the baby's diapers, frozen stiff, an old tin can, three spoons, the rusty axe atop her backpack.

She tried to shift its weight. It seemed to weigh a ton.

She longed to leave it in the ditch but knew that she dare not—how else to split the wood? How else to feed the baby? The handle strap cut deep into her shoulder and shot rays to the base of her skull, but that could not be helped. She valued her axe; it meant warmth; it meant flames from smoldering embers; each night, she could limber her old, aching joints by a fire and thaw the baby out.

That's how a few survived. Not many did. Some did.

They ate when they were lucky. They slept in empty barracks, in air raid shelters and abandoned schools. Each night, Natasha managed to discover yet another shack. A dank, deserted building. A gray delousing station. A goat stall. An old church.

All that, an hour's worth of triumph. Who hums to you, all icy, stiff and tired?

"If need be," said Natasha to herself before she fell asleep each night, "I'll step on someone else's bloated belly."

Had she had strength to spare, she would have howled. She had no strength to spare.

She had her axe; she hacked into the hostile earth with great ferocity.

The soil was hardening with winter, but Baba didn't quit. She dug. She shoveled. She grubbed for potatoes and turnips. With a frayed sack slung over her shoulder, flashlight in hand, on the prowl in the chill of the night—that's how the hardiest survived.

She would. She did. There was no other choice. What of the honey child?

Strong gusts of wind took Baba by the neck and pummeled her back and forth, but somehow, night by night, she braved the night in search of food and firewood and made it back to where the trek had camped—where Marleen hunched, herself a knot, a heap of gray, and waited for the cold to creep into her marrow.

# Chapter 116

"Don't get your hopes up high," said Lilo almost every night before the two girls fell asleep. By then, their friendship was cemented. The girls were more than friends, they were truly bosom buddies.

"I won't."

"That way, you won't be disappointed."

"I know."

"But on the other hand, don't lose hope. That would be your doom. Tomorrow they might come. In fact, I'm almost sure. An extra train is scheduled."

Lilo loved to be where action and excitement were, where people rushed the icy trains in search of missing relatives. If at all possible, she never missed the late-afternoon refugee trains.

Waiting to hear what happened to her people, however, was as exhausting and as tormenting for Erika as might have been a night filled with mosquitoes.

"Once they arrive," was Lilo's firm conviction, "life will be sweet and calm."

"You really think so, Lilo?"

"Of course."

"I bet they won't even recognize me any more," she said in hopes of being contradicted, and Lilo didn't let her down.

"Of course they will. The very thought! Why, on my deathbed I would say: 'That's Erika.' Someday you will be in for a surprise. Don't worry yourself thin."

She had grown seven centimeters. Her chest was rounding out, though insignificant compared to Lilo's, who sported half-grown melons, whereas hers were still little more than cherry-size at best.

"As long as there is hope, you keep on hoping, dummy," said Lilo several times a day, not one to let hope fade. "If not today, then certainly next week. I feel it in my stomach. It feels peculiar."

"Just keep on hoping, love," said Heidi, too, who understood the need for stop-gap measures, for hope was hope, and Erika had that and very little else.

One afternoon, as soon as it stopped sleeting and a pale sun emerged, the two girls, armed with four good flints, paid a strategic visit to a psychic through vaulted, crumbling passageways in hopes of speeding up the war and getting useful tips about the future.

Not sure that Heidi would approve, they did this on the sly, hearts pounding, stomachs churning. But there seemed little choice; the letters had stopped coming, and Erika's sore chest was clotted up with pain and homesickness despite the heated brick that Heidi stuck beneath the covers every night to ease her suffering.

This psychic, lying with amazing ease, predicted ample things against the howling winds while fingering her cards.

"Once peace is here," the psychic said, "one of you girls will board a ship and sail to foreign shores."

"Which one of us?" asked Lilo eagerly, believing every word. "For heaven's sakes, speak up."

"That is still unrevealed."

"We'll live?" squealed Erika before she lost her nerve. Her heart was leaping in her chest.

The psychic wouldn't look at her. "If anybody will, you will." She looked at Lilo, sharply, with old and beady eyes and sighed and asked with sudden vehemence: "You have another flint?"

"Yes. Here. Try hard. I want my money's worth."

"Where is the herring voucher? You promised me last time."

"I overpaid you last time, if you will please remember."

"That was last fall. This is a brand new session."

"Out with the truth! Will we be married soon?" To be a spinster was a cross best borne by someone else. "Speak up. Can you foretell a wedding?"

"Now, just sit still so I can concentrate." The psychic rearranged her faded skirt and let her lids droop softly: "What do I see? I see a man in uniform. He has a scar on his left hand. Don't ask me why. That's all that I can see."

Those words put Lilo in the seventh heaven of delight. Her face grew as pink as the inside of a bunny's ears. "That's Jonathan! That's probably my future bridegroom," she yelped and gave the dog a smacking kiss. Then she remembered Erika. "Well? What about her? I still have one flint left."

The psychic opened one eye carefully. "Let's call it a day," she said lamely.

Lilo spoke up aggressively. "This skinny little person is my friend. She writes amazing poetry. She's also good at eulogies." She mussed Erika's hair in an affectionate way. "I thought she'd be fatter by now."

The psychic wouldn't look at Lilo, much less at Erika. "That's neither here nor there."

Lilo shot her a worried look. "She's good in class. She pulls nothing but A's."

"That so?"

"Give her a pencil, and she starts to scribble. She just puts one word in front of another, and presto! There you have it. A poet, heart and soul."

The psychic squirmed and fussed. "Alas, we are at war."

Out came the well-known *angst* in Erika. She stared in disbelief, developing that tight, odd feeling in her rib cage. "I won't survive? Is that what she is saying?"

"Don't be a silly goose," said Lilo, a bit loud.

She almost lost it then and there. It all came flooding in. "It's bombs? I will be killed? Is that what she is saying?" The enemy was slamming bombs into the smoking city of Berlin as though into a dying carcass and leaving what they blasted into a bloody pulp for convicts to clean up. It was horrendous! Awful! Three or four times a day, the planes came roaring in! The dead lay in the rubble, unrecognizable. She was so frightened now from what she heard or, worse, began imagining because the psychic wouldn't speak—would not say anything beyond what she already had foretold!—that her left thigh began to cramp.

"Out with the truth," said Lilo sharply.

The psychic's smile kept flickering. "I see a book," she muttered, shifting accusing eyes on Erika, who shrank back in her seat. "I'm reading the last page."

"You know what? You're wrong!" said Lilo, furious. "I paid you honestly. I am a bit surprised."

The psychic moved her scrawny neck. She hugged herself for warmth. She said, avoiding Lilo's eyes: "Why ask for special favors?"

"Because I paid you," Lilo said. "All things considered, that's as good an argument as any. This funny little lady is my friend. Out with your secrets. Now! And your answer had better be good."

"I see an ashcan for this youngster," the psychic finally admitted, under siege. "And please don't ask me why."

For weeks, it was black piled on black. It was nothing but turnips and water.

The rumbling never stopped. The buildings groaned and shuttered. Lights out by five o'clock! The black-out curtains drawn!

All clear. The first wave gone.

The second on the way. A streetcar thundered by, its wheels still on, and turning.

The Führer spurred the Wehrmacht on on every front, demanding courage and endurance. Heidi listened to the wind that pushed against the boards that had replaced the window glass.

These days, she grew quieter and quieter.

"You think of this and that," she said at long last, and turned the radio off. A small convulsion passed through Heidi every time she raised her arm in the Hitler salute.

But Heidi let nobody suffer; Heidi was special that way. "This is the time to band together," she said, and wrought another miracle. Defeat was not her style.

Outside, another blizzard howled. The snow piled on the window sill. The trees stood dark and bare. Heidi kept throwing yarn over her knitting needles to fashion a new mitten.

She was made up of small, loving touches. She made the kitchen glow with warmth and hospitality, and every crumb was shared. She stood there, holding down the fort for Fatherland and Führer, self-disciplined, determined not to be defeated, her noodle roller in her hand and flour on her nose.

In the west, many stories are told of the last desperate days, and all of them are false.

It's true that the shelves in the shops were bare. It's true the bombs kept falling from the sky. Crowds thronged and pushed each other to make it to the bunkers. You buried yet another child with china eyelids and torn limbs. But somehow, life went on.

The Fatherland fought on, alone, without a single friend, with God its major ally.

It was right over wrong. It was light over dark. The cause was just. The Führer would strike back, and strike back hard. God favored him, and destiny was on his side. The day would come when honest grain would once again be rising from the earth.

That they survived at all was largely thanks to Heidi.

There was no sleeping in with Heidi, unless you were near death. She did all she could to help her country win, demanding that the girls do likewise.

Had Heidi not buried carrots in the sand the year before, they might not have survived. But Heidi was resourceful. She made the coupons stretch. If a dress needed re-hemming, Heidi found a needle. Her work never ended. Her Faith didn't fade. The moment the sun came out, she aired her feather quilts.

She picked up the dishes, put out the fires, folded the blankets, dusted the parlor and heated her kitchen for breakfast.

When Erika turned thirteen years of age, Heidi baked delicious coffee twists, having saved and skimped on food and rations for an entire month, using up the last coal in the pail.

She was untiring; and enduring—knitting and mending, skimping and saving, ironing another pillowcase, embroidered on the edge.

That's how it was for Heidi. Those were her traits; that was her personality. All else was stripped away except her Faith in fate.

She still had Faith to spare. The Führer would rebuild a world where youngsters had a chance and oldsters got a pension. And high time, too. It was bad now, and getting worse. For still the bombs came. Daily.

They came like dying meteors, pulled downwards by the weight of gravity. There seemed to be no end to them; in fact, the raids stepped up.

"What's preferable?" the Allied propaganda leaflets asked. "An unconditional surrender? Or your vast sea of rubble?"

"Yuk!" Lilo said, and made a face at the departing planes.

Lilo picked up Allied leaflets, her tongue between her teeth. She had been warned by people in the neighborhood the flyers might be poisoned. That was a risk that Lilo gladly took.

"Of course Berlin is moribund," the Allied leaflets claimed.

"If that is true," said Lilo, forcefully, "my name is Gugelhupf."

She put those leaflets to good use. She started rolling up her

hair in moistened leaflet curlers she twisted artfully.

"Concede," the leaflets atop Lilo's forehead claimed, "that Hitler is a loser."

"What kind of people do they think we are?" asked Lilo angrily, and watched as Winston Churchill started walking in a circle, fine shivers running up his spine.

She caught him by the tail and gave him a vigorous kiss. "There's no way whatsoever the Amis can kill Germany. No way! That is my firm opinion."

"She's a handful," said the neighbors and gave Heidi pitying looks. That was an apt description, for Lilo's spirit didn't quit. There was no stopping Lilo. She was relentlessly upbeat. She had her own philosophy, which stood her in good stead.

Whereas the rest, including Erika, marched in quadruple file, Lilo always walked ahead of any youth formation. She had other useful qualities as well. She was one of the finest target marksmen in the entire troop. She'd hoist the Führer's flag, no matter how the wind howled, thus demonstrating to the world that honor, duty, loyalty lay at the core of what this struggle was about. She honored every maxim.

Yet she knew what it took to survive.

All rules were simple now, as far as Lilo was concerned, because tomorrow might not come. Therefore, why not today? She took what she could find. She ate what she had handy. She shared whatever was left over; if there was nothing left, she filled up her belly with water.

"When it rains, you will be soaked, and that cannot be helped," she said to Erika on many an occasion, "but a warm sun will shine eventually. Meanwhile, you make your body taut and cut the cold in half."

She lay in wait behind a bush until a hapless rooster drifted by, and then she caught it by its legs and squeezed its neck—she squeezed it, long and hard. And then she sneezed the feathers from her nostrils.

That's what it took, she said—the skills of fast, efficient for-

age.

That's what it took—resourcefulness.

She even helped the convicts who sometimes used her as a scout to pick up drifting rumors.

The felons, who made up the cleaning crews, were a disheveled, silent lot. They took dead people by their shoulders and their heels and flung them on the platform of their trucks.

The convicts, too, were hungry and in rags. They marched in tiers of four while carrying their picks and shovels on their shoulders—all of them gaunt, fatigued. They plucked the bodies from the rubble, although they scarcely had the strength. In minutes, every burial sack would be powdered with fresh snow.

"God knows how many people saw me," Lilo told one of them, while handing him a leaflet. The leaflet claimed the war was done, the Führer in dire straits.

He stood stockstill at what he saw in her young, vibrant face.

"Just practicing, that's all," she added, rocking on her heels.

He watched her, wrists and ankles manacled. Their glances locked. Something forbidden crept into his eyes, no longer blue but gray. Something in hers responded.

"He's just a prisoner," said Erika, tugging at Lilo's sleeve, but Lilo spoke in undertones:

"So what? Why not give him a little hope? I am no friend of the barbarians, but he—I bet you he's still young. No older than nineteen or twenty."

"Having yet to be corrected—" Erika was making frantic gestures, but Lilo merely shrugged. Her magic was her youth. It softened everything.

"Watch out! Here comes America!" the convicts sneered at times, an inch away from treason, the moment they saw Lilo with leaflets in her hair.

The two girls knew about America the way they knew about assorted angels, gremlins, unicorns and ghosts. They often pondered the enigma called America.

America could only be described as baffling, a country huge but ignorant, belonging to amazing fools. Blessed with amazing riches, Americans were slow politically and wasteful with resources. They used their elevators going down. They sold vast chunks of ice cream in the winter. They used their scalloped paper napkins only once, then threw them away. And they had other vices—such as a total disbelief in racial harmony and unity. Had they no eyes nor ears? No brains with which to think? What reason could they give for wanting to bomb Germany to smithereens? None. None at all. Above all else, Americans were blind—blind to the truth, blind to the real foe. They had their brain cells laundered; the Hebrews did the laundering. It was as if the Führer's generals spoke to iron and to stone.

"Why be a lackey to the Jews?" the Führer wondered many times in broadcast after broadcast.

What was it with America? was Lilo's question mark.

To which she had no answer. Americans were trusting, like small children. Americans were fast with cars, but set on self-destruct.

The next thing that might happen, the teacher had explained, would be attempts to have the Negroes melt into their race—a plan, so far, that did not have a chance.

The Jews used the Americans, the teacher furthermore explained, to fight their wars for them, to kill off race-proud Germany, to crack its spine and kill its pride and stop its beating heart.

The evidence was everywhere. The dead lay there and stared at Erika with glassy eyes, all stiff before the day was gone, like logs, until the rubble crews had time to come and haul them to their graves. Sometimes that took two days, for it was snowing now, relentlessly, dune piled on dune, more snow yet on the grey horizon, piling up.

"What fool on earth would want to be a mongrel?" the Führer always asked.

The answer was more bombs.

# Chapter 117

It finally stopped sleeting briefly and the sun came out again, but then the mud began to form fine crystals at its surface that didn't thaw at noon.

There were still turnips in the soil, hard to dig out, but Baba had that axe. She'd braved the dust, the mud, the rain, and now she braved the winds. She would brave every blizzard, too, she knew would soon blow in.

The earth was as hard as rock. Shovels broke. The trekkers cursed. It took all of her strength to break the frozen crust. The trek did not slow down. Huge storms were building in the clouds. The sky first turned chalky, then black. The wind grew strong and stronger.

Everyone with wheels kept trekking west, both Faith and fear propelling them. Faith still had the texture of granite.

Just ask.

And marvel at the strength with which the creed believed, all pushing on, all in a westerly direction, all pulling carts or pushing baby buggies, dragging blankets, boxes, sacks and barrels, along with badly dented household goods.

The *Landsers* attacked as never before, but the Fatherland shrank. It shrank daily. The Wehrmacht's losses were colossal. The sparrows fell in droves. They kept on tumbling from the wires that still hummed messages of victory.

The guns froze, by and by. The Wehrmacht's fingers fell away.

The *Landsers* blew up bridge after bridge to stop the Antichrist, but still he gained distance, day after day. Trench by trench and inch by inch, the Red Army pressed on west, flattening the trenches with their tank treads, crushing the shivering flesh.

"*Urray*! Here's a present!" the enemy howled, tossing hand grenades into the pitiful, disintegrating front. Nobody wanted shame; you hoped for victory; the trekkers plodded on in silence and obedience, in fear and hunger and exhaustion—chilled to the marrow, sleepless, silent.

West! Westwards, everyone! Where life was warm and good.

The old and the young were the first.

The old and weak dropped, one by one, exhausted, by the roadside, where they were left to die. The ditches were dotted with babies.

A four-year-old died of exposure in the wagon just ahead. It lay there, stiff and mottled, on a board. The grieving mother sat beside the road, refusing to rejoin the flight, begging passersby in a thin voice to help cover her darling with earth. The trek did not slow down.

In numbers beyond counting, it plodded on, still swelling like a reptile.

The vehicles moved slowly—bumper to bumper, wheel after wheel. Women. Children. Cows and goats. Cavalry and infantry. Ambulance attendants. Cyclists. Forage crews.

The wounded from the front arrived in open, steaming trucks.

New refugees arrived from Prussia, Pomerania, Silesia, East Brandenburg.

Most people walked with kinfolk from their home provinces.

Those from the cities came on foot, those from the villages and towns still had their horses, luckily, although no longer shod. The animals left bloody hoofprints in the snow.

Exhausted, frightened people poured into the trek as it fled west, from left and right, their bundles on their backs, pulling handcarts, dragging bedding—ahead of bursting bombs! Ahead of whining bullets!

A million trekkers pushed on west, and twice as many horses.

Natasha pushed a wheelbarrow—the baby was inside. A wheelbarrow was not a pony cart, but on the other hand, much better than a tub, a table or a chair. Some pulled those now, along the icy road, their invalids atop.

On through the dreary landscape! On through the ice and snow!

"*Paschol*!" Natasha howled.

She was easing the load of the mares. On her back, she carried her axe, an extra blanket, seven potatoes and an empty burlap sack. She hung on to that burlap sack, for she had plans: as soon as the trek stopped, as soon as she found yet another windblown shack, where she could stir some warmth from ashes for the child, she'd cut it up for diapers.

Marleen was deathly ill. Her face had started caving in. It looked as hollow as her two mares' flanks—skeletons so drained of strength by then that they could barely set their hooves. At night, Marleen sat, numb and silent, both hands around her head, too exhausted to lessen her anguish with prayers.

Natasha rocked the baby.

It barely moved; its throat was tight; its glands were hard, like rows of hazel nuts. Gray bands of lice moved up and down its neck. After a while, it closed its eyes and fell asleep, and only then did Baba think that she might try to get some sleep as well, her face turned to the wall, her head on Marleen's legs.

Rain turned to sleet. Sleet turned to ice.

Each night, with the day's journey done, Natasha had to pull

Marleen down from the wagon, leg by leg and arm by arm, and coax her, word by word, into a nearby shelter, heaving her with difficulty into the warmest corner where there was hardly room to move.

This night was dark by the time they arrived.

Natasha skipped the first and settled for the second edifice; it had the sturdier beams. She pushed gingerly against the door with the tip of her right foot; her left foot was swollen to grotesque proportions, the toes were black and blue.

"Hey? Anybody here?"

The door swung open with a creaking noise. She closed it quickly to Marleen, but not before she saw: three rows of corpses, piled against the wall. They lay there, orderly, one piled atop the other.

She didn't bother to find out how they had died. This was war. The living stepped over the dead.

She looked around. The roof had holes. The windows had been broken out. Somebody had been chopping up the frames, presumably for firewood.

She saw the outline of four bunks. Crude planks. No straw. No matter. She checked out every corner to verify that it was clear of partisans and traitors.

That heap there on the bunk? She checked that, too. It moved. Somebody had curled up to die, an old and tired man.

"Move! Move!" she swore at him.

He wouldn't budge. She gave him one good shove. She had no patience with his wish; the baby was covered with frost. She took the stranger by the heels and pulled him from his bunk, then spread her own rags there.

Life was reduced to this: the baby needed warmth. The baby needed soap. Lice ate into the flesh around the meager buttocks.

The floor was frozen earth.

She found a torn and dirty newspaper and put a match to headline after headline. Soon, timid flames were dancing. The wind extinguished them repeatedly. She hunched and rocked the

baby. She heard the night howl mournfully.

A moon appeared, a moon as chill and distant as that strange land Marleen once called America the Wonderland, a warm and scented place somewhere across the ocean, somewhere beyond the howling universe of hell.

This, too, is history. That's how Natasha fought, each night, with all the strength left in her limbs for that cramped spot to thaw the baby out, beside the burning embers.

Outside, both friend and foe lay frozen in the snow.

Bombs dug up shallow graves on both sides of the trek.

The hay allotment had been cut in half and then in half again; the animals fell in their traces; starvation had hollowed their bellies. The potholes swallowed tanks. A small cadaver lay forlornly in a trench.

And still the trek rolled on.

Guns, ammunition, tools, canteens, greatcoats, a hundred thousand other items were strewn along the road. At noon, the sun still had some strength, but by mid-afternoon all warmth was gone; the sun's rays lost their radiance; the winds kept slashing gaps into the struggling front. The war did not let up.

The sky was as gray as a louse.

The wind started cutting with knives. The bombs and shells kept falling. The horses strained. Blood ran out of their wounds. Another battle was expected soon. It would reverse the war. Another bird fell tumbling from a branch.

A whistling wind lashed fleeing flesh. The animals panted and slithered, jumping skittishly at sudden booms that shook the air and drove the pallor even wanner into Marleen's drawn, careworn face. She lay amid her soggy blankets, already stiffening with winter, just sunken face and trembling hands, refusing to climb down and limber herself by the fire.

Clusters of freezing flesh clung to the rattling trains. The ravens, carrion eaters, now followed every movement of the trek.

Natasha locked her jaw. She walked in snow tracks that

others had cut. She saw the bodies fall. The crows dropped, one by one, onto the fallen mounds. She circumvented all; she kept plodding to the west; she had no other choice. Her feet were living coals, but yet she walked. The sun turned pale and shriveled; the wind picked up more fury. Snow crunched beneath her feet. Dry leaves raced over vast graveyards.

She checked a young woman's body. The cold had jackknifed her; she was quite dead; Natasha knelt over her cadaver.

She checked it carefully: for ration cards, for food, for flints, for matches, anything. When someone came and challenged her, she flew into a rage. She struck the brash intruder with both fists until he slunk away.

She took her find back to the trek to feed Marleen, who merely shook her head.

Natasha turned vociferous. "Why be a fool? Eat while you can. There won't be food tomorrow—"

"Just go ahead and eat my share."

Marleen could barely speak. A fiery ocean roared within her head; her eyes glistened with heat. The constant tickle in her throat had changed into a rasping cough.

"Please. Have a bite."

"No. No. Just keep it for yourself."

"Please! Listen! Listen carefully! Don't give up now. We're almost there. A final push will surely—"

Marleen moaned to the jolting of the wagon, suspecting hazily that her long life was running out, and knowing there was comfort in that thought. She was a sparrow in the snow. She was an animal collapsing on the road. As soon as she tried forcing down her food, she spit it up again.

Her vision glazed, as if by frost; her ears, near deaf, from the relentless howling of the storm. She had lived long enough to know that, come what may, when yet another season came to pass, death took a rich, rich harvest.

But reaping never was in vain. She knew that for a fact.

The rivers all lay paralyzed. The ice inside no longer cracked,

and there was stillness now.

"She's dying," wept Natasha, and started cuffing Mimi.

Marleen did not die easily. Two days before, her legs broke under her as though they were two sticks of wood, and she fell down in spasms. Natasha watched her fall and flung the baby from herself into the arms of someone near. She knelt beside Marleen.

"What's this? You quit? And you are not ashamed?"

Marleen could barely speak. "It is too late. I'm bleeding from a thousand wounds."

"Hold onto me. This way."

"I'm finished," moaned Marleen, by then no longer sensible. This vale of tears? A world a sea of white, the land marks disappearing. "Just leave me here. It's best."

Natasha shook Marleen and cuffed her with both fists to bring her to her senses and even swore at her as in the olden days, but Marleen paid no heed. Her body flamed with poison; she lay, hunched over, in the snow and would not lift her head. That's when Natasha tied her to a plank and started pulling her along the icy roads, to lighten the load of the mares. So let the baby bounce awhile atop the swaying wagons, beneath the frozen tent! The infant was a patient thing by now, no longer whimpering.

She checked it now and then. It didn't stir, but blinked. Fat flakes froze on its lashes.

Mimi, wrapped in a fallen soldier's bullet-riddled overcoat, was walking, too—she scarcely knew how.

She had stripped the coat from someone who no longer needed it; that didn't bother her at all; by then, most people on the trek were unmoved by the glassy eyes of fallen heroes, young or old. She turned the corpse's pockets inside out; he didn't mind; she didn't mind; why not?

There was now very little feeling left for anyone or anything—the winter stripped off feeling as though it were a knife whittling off bark. A hand, a foot stuck from a dune of snow; she didn't

stop; that didn't touch her any more; these things were commonplace.

As tightly as she could, she clutched the child Natasha thrust at her, so she could find a sheltered corner where she could lift her skirt. Her kidneys burned like fire. Natasha said she had to pee; there was a bush; now hush! and, therefore, Mimi leaned against a tree and tried to stroke the mottled face.

The child no longer moved.

"Poor thing. Poor thing," she muttered, while waiting for Natasha to return. "Poor baby. Honey child."

She kept on stroking it. An ear came off. It broke like glass. With a small moan, she flung it from herself.

That afternoon, she disappeared and was not seen again. Some people claim she coiled herself as tightly as she could and leaped onto a Red Cross train that took the wounded home.

She made it. She survived. She sits there now, on Josie's couch. She never speaks of it—what helped her to survive.

# Chapter 118

Death came from America daily. The airplanes roared over and emptied their bellies. Death fell like rain. It came and departed again.

This war was slaughter, bare and raw and bloody beyond words. There was no other civil name.

Formerly, the bombs had fallen every night. Now it was mornings, too, and sometimes afternoons. The drones of the airplanes could already be heard. Explosions boomed from several miles away.

"Here is as good as there," said Heidi. Sometimes it was to the bunkers, and sometimes it was not, depending on how near the bombs were hitting, judging from the booms.

Heidi made the bombing raids endurable by showing little fear. She was resigned to them and sat them out as calmly as she could, not saying much at all, right underneath the pictures of her fallen sons—all three of them in uniform, dispensing reassuring smiles between successive waves.

"By extraordinary exercise of will, we will build brand new

foundations from the ruins," the Führer's broadcast said, and Heidi added to that thought with quiet civility: "We might as well stay here."

That was okay with Lilo as well as Erika. The frantic sprint for the shelters was not exactly fun. Inside the bunkers, infants wailed; oldsters prayed; The sirens howled; the minutes kept on ticking.

"Well, there you have it, Erika," said Lilo, a bit loud. "This time, it wasn't all that bad."

No matter the confusion, she held onto her mutt. The two girls, sitting to the left and right of Heidi, as close as they could scoot, now listened to the distant rumble of the planes as they moved off with a huge sound resembling a receding train or a departing thunderstorm.

"They've barely disrupted my breakfast. At least I've had my breakfast, if you can call it that."

So loud was Lilo's boast that Erika was snapped from her trance, though her face was still drawn with an unsteady hand, while Winston Churchill stretched and smiled, revealing yellow teeth, and started pawing something.

"Are you all right?" asked Heidi, too, while slipping a warm arm around Erika. Heidi was never impatient with terror. She let you know with slim, spare gestures that she fully understood.

Heidi was useless for several weeks right after the black-bordered letters arrived, three letters in four days, all telling her that death was instantaneous; the Führer would always remember.

She should be proud, his letters pointed out. Death had came honorably for the sake of a better tomorrow.

"Your son has sealed his loyalty with death," the Führer wrote to Heidi. Three times. Three letters in four days. One following the other. Eight words, identical, above the Hooked Cross.

Her eyes were blind for days. The neighbors told her that she was an inspiration. There was nothing to question or add.

Wild blizzards raged outside.

The refugees came staggering in, their only goods in tatters

on their backs, and filled up every empty space. In this last winter of the war, there was no end to refugees—a rag-tag lot, just churning along in desperate processions, all pulling sleds and carts. They were footsore and hungry and sad. Soon, the cellars were bursting with them.

"There is still hope," said Heidi, her eyes on Erika, who scanned each ashen face. "Right after class, just run along and check the lists. There's always still tomorrow. But don't forget. There might be a delay."

Heidi stood with her back to the stove, fine tremors on her lips. Heidi couldn't seem to warm herself, no matter how high the flames leaped.

Trains came and went—iced-over, end to end. At the main railroad station, despairing people ran their trembling fingers down the posted columns of authenticated casualties, updated twice a day.

Erika did that each afternoon as well - just to make sure her family was still alive. She still had hope. Her hope was like a carousel, just whirling round and round, its horses without riders.

Since she had come to Germany, the Fatherland had managed to survive a ferocious, freezing winter; the coal allowance had run out; the promised wood did not arrive, but patriots surrendered their best winter coats to help the Wehrmacht win. Whatever frozen creature stepped through Heidi's door was automatically entitled to a steaming bowl of soup, no matter it was Friday morning still and ration cards were not due until Monday afternoon.

"A hot bowl of soup keeps body and soul together, that's what I always say," said Heidi every morning, apportioning her coupons.

She cooked turnips in every known and even some unknown disguises. She trimmed. She cut corners. She saved till there was nothing left to save.

Heidi, too, was a believer. She stood with her comrades, el-

bow to elbow and jaw next to jaw—a three-striped mother, sadly.

She never mentioned them to anyone, her three young martyred sons, although at times she mentioned Jonathan, who still sent sparing postcards from the front, his Faith intact as ever.

When Lilo heard the news that her brothers had fallen, her food grew cold that night. Had someone come to her and ordered: "Now die so that the Fatherland may live!" she would have put herself behind an ack-ack gun and sold herself as dearly as she could.

She closed the door on everyone, though Winston Churchill scratched and carried on outside and wouldn't leave her be. She put a chair in front of it, and what she did behind that door was anybody's guess.

For one long week, Lilo walked on wooden knees. Then she snapped out of grief; she oiled her bicycle with extra care and, face averted, unwilling to tell anybody anything, she made for the gate and disappeared for an entire day, and with her, Winston Churchill.

No one could match Lilo's speed when she took corner after corner with deviltry in mind, pursued by Winston Churchill, who had the wanderlust. That day, it was ice cold but clear; the war kept bellowing, an uncaged Beast; the Allies bombed Berlin from one end to the other. Both brick and mortar flew—but that did not stop Lilo.

"That girl has got as many lives as the proverbial nine cats," the neighbors said, and sighed, as Lilo zipped on by. That day, she pedaled for her life, right through the icy gales, right through the ocean of destruction, braids flying in the wind, head held up high, jaw set, her empty bookbag swinging at the handle, and Winston Churchill nearly lost his tongue.

All day long, not a sign of either!

When finally they made it back, the girl and her beloved mutt, his ears looked strangely chewed, and she was pale and trembling, but in her backpack she had riches: three loaves of bread, two hundred grams of bacon, wrapped carefully in cellophane, a

medium bag of beans, one hard-boiled egg stamped with a number, three slivers of curled cheese and, best of all, four pieces of rarefied sugar she dropped without another word into her mother's tea.

"That's all I could come up with, Mommie," she said, and wouldn't look at Heidi, and Heidi put two trembling arms around her last, surviving child and said with a dry sob:

"You scared me half to death. Where have you been? Why can't you be like Erika?"

Time flew, no matter what. Spring came and went. Heidi tended to a corner plot on which cucumbers grew. The shrubs received a pruning, the bench a brand new coat. She raked the sidewalk carefully and sprinkled it with freshly moistened sand. All that ran in her bones. She did not change; she still darned socks; she never groused; she just intensified her mothering. She mothered everyone.

She let out yet another seam, another hem, because the dresses Erika had brought from Apanlee had grown too short and pinched around the chest. She washed and ironed an old ribbon she found deep in the bottom of a drawer and braided Erika's long hair, cross-patterning it carefully.

She said, referring to the planes that still kept dropping death:

"They look like us. We look like them. Why are they doing this to us? You wonder in quiet moments."

Quiet moments? This was a noisy war.

The Antichrist still hissed from every orifice. Each night, the bombs kept whistling down. The Führer's anti-aircraft searchlights kept fingering the sky, while every siren howled. The enemy flew over, dropped his bombs, retreated, returned for yet another run. House after house collapsed in heaps of smoking rubble, from which, at times, moans could be heard below.

Some buildings burned for days. The Führer insisted: "Just leave the last battle to me."

"Eat, eat," said Heidi to the girls at every opportunity, for

Heidi had no appetite herself. Her heart was like a tomb, now that she had received those letters.

She hugged her sorrow tight. Three photographs sat on her dresser, trembling slightly with each blast.

She wore three sable ribbons on her sleeve. The Fatherland provided them for free. At night, she lay awake, trapped in a nightmare of her own. No words could touch her pain. Her bed shook with her grief.

The girls could hear her through the walls. Sometimes the girls crept out of their warm bed and sat with Heidi, a silent shadow shedding tears. You didn't see the tears. You knew.

Now she was knitting socks for someone else's son, who would as well, if need be and the Führer asked, fling his young life, with gallantry, into the grim equation.

The war had hardened people's faces and coarsened people's tongues, but around Heidi everyone was mannerly. For months on end, Lilo was on her best behavior.

She tiptoed around Heidi. She went in search of cigarette stubs—the best of currency!—and those she found, she traded up for food, which helped to stretch the vouchers.

"There is no nobler death," said Heidi at long last. "It's us against the Antichrist. Since there is justice in the universe, that kind of sacrifice can never be in vain."

The neighborhood agreed, their eyes on Heidi's stripes. The sock she was knitting grew longer and longer, and if she dropped a stitch, she barely noticed it. Her face was marked with pain, but her shoulders were straight; she didn't wear black except for three small sable ribbons. She looked at the girls, who still had a future and, for their sake and for their future's sake, put on a a polka-dot dress.

Her message was simplicity itself: the best was barely good enough when it came to her Fatherland and Führer. Tomorrow was a brand new day for you to prove yourself.

"Just do your best, no matter what," she said, her favorite litany, and Erika remembered Baba, since that was her refrain as

well.

She missed Natasha more than any member of her family. She missed her with an ache that never went away. But Heidi was a runner-up in meriting her love. In fact, she was almost as good.

Last night, for instance, Heidi said: "Maybe next week? There's always hope. There might have been a bottleneck somewhere."

She fully understood why hope now counted more than certainty. And Lilo seconded her words; she was her mother's child: "I'm almost sure. They might come any day."

You clung to that. Day-in, day-out, you clung to hope, for there was little else. You could depend on Heidi. You could heal in the rays of her goodness of nature. You could bask in the warmth of her spirit.

It had been hard to fall asleep; Erika was sure her appendix was just about to burst; but Heidi knew a remedy—a hot brick, wrapped in a flannel shirt, to lessen the fullness and cramping, an unexpected malady. Heidi had warmed that brick for hours in the oven, to soak up every shred of heat, left over still from supper.

"This ought to help," she said to Erika and put it gently on her tummy where it still rested, warm.

Still deep within a sleepy haze, now Erika was wondering just what her family might say the moment they arrived. She was no longer bony as she had been when she left Apanlee. Her legs were putting on some muscle, thanks to her sprinting class. Her back was straight; her chest was filling out, and other things were happening as well.

There was a woozy feeling in her veins she had not felt before. "The ritual of meeting the trains," she told herself, still deep within her feather quilts, lost in another reverie, "is verily the highlight of my day. Today might be the day."

Each day she told herself: today might be the day.

It was the end of January, nearly—with only six weeks left till it was spring again.

# Chapter 119

Four weeks after Christmas, the most violent snowstorm of that bitter winter roared in.

All afternoon, it snowed. Thick virgin snowflakes started floating from a mass of clouds that turned first gray, then black. The winds kept rolling snow dunes. The winds changed everything.

They brought a blizzard from the reaches of the Arctic—soft flakes at first, deceiving. But, then, the drifts turned into piles too high for plowing through—yet still a few pushed on. The killer winds came from Siberia and lifted leaves and leaflets and swept them into trenches left over from the First World War. Storms froze the northern coast. Snow fell and stuck to everything.

Wagon wheels broke off. Horses stumbled, fell—the snowfall blinded them.

The trekkers fell in droves.

Gray, haggard soldiers packed the streets, dispatched to kill or die. The cold took the guns from their fingers. Assault columns stalled in the feathery drifts. Gray heaps lay piled in the

ditches, soon covered with granular snow.

The roaring blizzards of that year would turn the tables on the Wehrmacht. Oil froze in the trucks. Weapons wouldn't fire. The thermometer dropped. The ice crept over everything as if it were alive.

Natasha watched it grow. It crackled as it grew.

It crept up on the blankets beneath which lay the child—alive, but only barely. It wrapped itself around the infant's neck and started strangling it. The baby froze into its diapers.

Natasha blew her breath against it. The snow flakes melted briefly from her love, then reappeared again.

"Little birdling," she kept muttering, while watching how before her eyes the landscape itself draped in white. The earth froze with such sudden speed it started cracking. Breaking.

"Chickabiddy. Honeybun. The rest of my life for an armful of blankets."

The flakes kept on whirling. The front was collapsing, the casualties fearsome. The Fatherland was hanging by its fingernails. The dead lay where they fell. Hand-hewn crosses dotted the roadsides.

The war went on, its bitterness increasing. The borders blazed in violence. Fat snowflakes danced and whirled. The Wehrmacht fought and bled.

The roads were clogged with refugees still pouring in from pockets of Silesia. And still a few walked on, though winter had arrived to stay, now forming ice around the horses' nostrils and powdering the baby's lashes with fine snow.

Marleen lay flat amid the frozen bedding, barely moving. Her throat was raw, her breathing labored, yet she was praying fervently. Since there was nothing else to do, she helped Natasha pray. Both women kept assailing heaven; they had their Faith and nothing else; their Faith glowed as a tiny flame within; not even winter could take it from them.

The sky bore down with icy pincers. The wind struck with

force, never letting up. Natasha wrapped every rag she could find around the child.

"—here's what I promise you. So help me God! So help me God! When this war is over, I'll get you your own puppy—"

This is forgotten now: raw murder drove Natasha.

Marleen refused to walk. She coughed and wheezed and spit. Her prayers were as bitter as gray salt. She spit blood after violent spasms. The Wehrmacht had achieved another victory, the bulletins proclaimed. The Führer formed new armies with enormous energy and will. There were more superweapons ready. The tide of war would turn. The remnants of the trek crawled into yet another town.

The road was ice; all strength was sapped; the horses kept on slipping. Their hooves left bloody prints.

The Arctic winds did not diminish. They drove the trek as though the wagons were but chaff. The wagons, carts and bicycles kept rolling on, toward the west, where life was warm and good.

And all the while: the Antichrist was closing in.

There was no doubt by then: the Red Army was driving the Wehrmacht before it.

Huge trees swayed at the force of icy gusts. Wheels were thick with snow. Barrels and burlap, barb wire, canisters, ramshackle prams lay strewn along the road. The air currents bore acrid clouds of cordite.

The wind lashed at Natasha's face; her cheeks flamed like October apples. Her ankles gangrened, she pushed on. She wore a fallen soldier's boots, stuffed thick with newspapers, and that's why she still walked. A sole was loose; a heel had fallen off; she had huge blisters on both feet, but she still walked. She walked.

Another morning came. The trek began to stir.

The refugees roped up their bedrolls and listened to the broadcast, yearning for the impossible. The water in the pails was frozen. The war did not let up. The grease froze in the *Landsers'*

guns so that they couldn't fire. Bomb craters held horses and women and children, all dead, all frozen stiff. The dead were littering the road; the living kept on, plodding west, not having any other choice, against all odds, their heads held low, bent over with their struggle, their jaws locked into place, and never mind that walls of snow were forming on both sides.

Natasha heard a shrill giggle and knew it had jumped from her lips. She giggled at her foolishness.

She muttered, for habit was habit: "My little calf. Who sucks the cold out of your spindly fingers?"

Icicles glittered everywhere. She kept herself within the shelter of the blanket that she had tied across her wagon, and that's why she still walked. There was no longer hope, there was no longer thought, there was no longer fear or fury or resentment. For old Natasha, this was left: a dull, relentless walking through the snow.

"My life for a cupful of milk for the baby. . . " she offered, frostbite on both her feet and on the infant's nose. She beseeched every saint she remembered for miracles, by then long overdue. "—but fresh from the udder and steaming—"

"—and if not milk," Marleen, delirious herself, diminished Baba's gluttony, "—at least a herring head!"

Marleen kept whimpering, inside a heap of burlap sacks, atop her swaying wagon. Low moans came out of her in answer to the jolting of the road. Faint, bloody foam was forming on her lips.

The baby was still stirring.

There was ice on its forehead, ice in its hair, ice between its meager fingers. Natasha pulled her collar up and pushed against the storm, still holding the horses in leash. All she could do was to follow the path that others had trampled already—follow the desperate scramble and hope she could outrun the snow.

Natasha was still carrying her axe.

Behind her, Soviet Army soldiers climbed from frozen cracks.

A new day came; the wind did not diminish. The blizzard

whipped on horizontal strips of snow. The sky kept glistening.

By noon already, daylight faded. With gritted teeth, her jaws on fire, Natasha pushed past forest after forest, all bent beneath the weight of snow, tears hardening in seconds on her lashes.

Gray bodies drowned before her eyes within the snowy dunes. Sleighs piled with corpses passed her by—the Führer's broken armies. It was so cold that the horizon trembled.

That winter was the coldest in a century, and in the end, it silenced all.

It paralyzed the rivers. It clogged the Führer's autobahns. The strongest horses were collapsing in the drifts. The *Landsers* started tossing down their weapons. To their armpits, they sank in the snow.

That's when they came! Mongolian faces materialized like apparitions from the snow.

A few *Landsers* tried gunning the demons.

But the Wehrmacht was vastly outnumbered, though the Reich spent its last drop of blood. Across the frozen earth rolled German tanks and yet more tanks, now manned by grizzled men or teenagers.

All that, for nothing. All in vain.

For the Antichrist's army grew out of the earth. It fell from the trees. It grew from the cracks in the ice. It started overrunning the crumbling front, spreading out like a gigantic fan. It crossed over the paralyzed rivers, streaming like slithering rats.

It poured into the heart of Germany in furry caps, felt boots, and padded snow coats, colorless, impossible to see against the snow-white dunes—and in its glance was stoic cruelty enough to freeze the marrow. It wore American-made hand grenades fastened securely to thick leather belts—the Army of the Antichrist: as numerous as ants! As eons shrank to seconds, it moved as glaciers moved, a force of nature, massive, inexorable, crushing everything in its way to rubble, hair and flesh. The eastern snow turned crimson with the blood of Germany.

Before this wave of well-equipped abomination now strug-

gled the defeated armies of the Führer—wounded, battered, mutilated, leaving weapons, tanks, canteens, pieces of furniture, barrels, burlap bags small cards, large maps, sleds, overturned chairs, bicycles, wheelbarrows, ration tins and first aid kits.

And overhead, wing-tip to wing-tip, America!

Survivors of the Trek of 1944 are few and scattered now across the earth. They are loathe to re-live what they lived, still racked with the memories of their scrupulous war.

That it was just and scrupulous is yet their firm belief. Not one of them will have it otherwise. They'll tell you, now and then, in ancient, trembling voices, but only if the night is still and soft, and gentle flames light up a fireplace and warm a living room. They speak of it if there is food and drink and safety and old friends whom they can trust not to defame what was reality for them and will be to their dying days. They'll tell you. Listen. Listen hard.

They'll say: "You have that war all wrong."

In their old voices, halting, in trembling words, they'll ask: "Who was at fault? At fault was the Eternal Jew. Say what you will. It's true."

"And take your Holocaust out of my face," they'll say, warm blankets on their knees and perhaps Rhine wine sparkling in their glasses to ease the weight of memory.

They ask with ancient voices:

"What do you know, you fools, snug in your plastic world? First-hand, we saw the Antichrist. Head-on, the Wehrmacht met the Antichrist. It cracked my mother's bones. It froze my father's blood. It laid our hearts to ashes. It killed our finest dreams."

"We heard its howl," they claim. "The blizzards carried it."

They'll tell you in their trembling voices: "That's history, not taught in any school. It's history it was a Jew who lashed his vicious words across the wind-whipped steppe to drive the Reds, clad in the Devil's uniform, with weapons from the West, into a killer army frenzy."

They say: "You want a name? We have a name. His name

was Ilya Ehrenburg—a Soviet propagandist, a Jew, paid by the New York caftans and yarmulkes."

And here is what he howled, three times a day, across the trembling wires from which the sparrows fell: "Kill. Kill. And kill. No one is innocent. Nobody. Nobody. Neither the living, nor the yet unborn."

And kill the Soviets did, when finally they came. The Soviets killed most anything in eastern Germany the winter left behind.

When their last horse fell to its knees for good, stuck in a snowdrift higher than a man, Natasha tried to dig Marleen out of the pile of frozen blankets.

She pulled and pushed and marshaled every curse she knew, but Marleen was as heavy as lead. Around her roared another furious snowstorm, cutting visibility to just a few yards. Fine crystal needles whipped down from the sky. Natasha scooped up snow and tried to rub Marleen's drawn face; but soon she realized: the snow no longer melted. Drifts piled up in minutes around Marleen's still slightly steaming body.

She had been first in life. Now she was first in death. She died in Hein's old boots. No point in leaving those.

Natasha pulled them off Marleen. She tried to force her swollen feet into the boots that now belonged to her. Her hands were numb. Her heart was numb. Her feet were numb and fat. The universe was numb. The infant in Hein's sheepskin was still stirring.

She forced one leg into the stiffened leather, but could not force the other. Her ankles were too thick. Her toes were black and swollen.

She had an axe. It glistened briefly, then it fell. She left her toes behind but not her baby. Not her baby. Not her last honey child belonging to the clan.

"Thus disappeared Natasha," say the survivors now. "She was a Russian, kind and good, devoted to our cause. She sacrificed as well. She might have made it to the west, had not the

Antichrist requested the Americans to stop. Where is her monument?"

That's what they want to know. That, too, is history. How every shred of warmth she had, she gave away—for naught. Her blood was shed as well—and not by Germany. She chose to have it seep into Hein's boots which, once upon a glorious time, had walked contently over land that grew the golden kernels with strength and color and vitality—all that, and more, all borrowed confidently from the sun.

The night has swallowed Baba. No one remembers her.

There is no monument to her in Washington, D.C. to let the future know how old Natasha tried so hard, and yet in vain, to rescue the last morsel left of the glorious creed that came from Apanlee.

# Chapter 120

Erika's mind was still drifting in circles when the alarm clock on the night stand started dancing gently.

"Just three more minutes, that is all," she thought, too sleepy to feel guilty, while hoping that the coming day, filled to the brim with social usefulness, would somehow go away.

She was still small. She'd just as soon sleep in.

To sleep in with permission was just as rare as having measles twice, but Heidi didn't hoard her wisdom. She knew things ordinary human beings only sensed, and made allowances for Erika. She knew that, under special stress, as yesterday, when shame collected even in one's toes, it was important to relax discipline for changes and exceptions.

She tried to put it from her mind—the thing that happened yesterday. Not yet! She could not face that yet! She squinted with one eye. The floor lay flecked with sunshine. The mutt lay in the corner, fast asleep.

School! The first three periods did not worry her. First period was taken up with essays—that's where she really shone. Already one was hatching in her mind—the kind that put lumps

in your throat. Each morning, before she was fully awake, she nestled a few of her favorite phrases. When it came to her essays, no one could outdo Erika.

To be the best at writing essays, she had worked out a ritual.

When she awoke each morning, for instance with a sinking heart, she noticed that her mind was empty, but not for long—into the vacuum rushed new words. If she found words, then fortitude, persistence and endurance came floating in as well. The end result was yet another gem, still better than the last. Once she had reached that level of accord, the rest slid into place.

The teacher always spoke with great solemnity when praising her wordsmithing skill. You could never exhaust the meaning of life—or the meaning of death, for that matter— with a new combination of words.

New words were like diamonds resting on velvet.

When she had brand new words with which to play, the worries of the coming day grew still. Words were like mint. They helped her breathe. They started raw. She polished them. Words could be virgin. Novel. Marvelous. They took all fear away.

Last night, while putting final touches to a sentence that shone with the fire of worship—the need for sacrifice, the need to die a noble death so someone else might live—the draft from a bomb blast had blown out the candle. She had not finished what she meant to say, but now she finished it:

"You can burn down a house. You cannot burn the wind. You cannot burn an ocean. You cannot burn a cloud. You can burn down a building, but nature can't be burned. It's spring. The trees are emerald with spring. A frontline soldier lives and dies—the Fatherland lives on."

This essay now churned in her head. It needed a finale. She tried to rein it in. She felt happy in spite of herself; she had a fine beginning. When it came to her essays, she, Erika, held nothing back. All of her senses rallied.

So now. Her eyes would wake up first, and then her nose, and finally her ears. She needed them; she cocked her ears for

rhythm. Her essays were the ones the teacher always chose because they spoke of suffering and anguish, necessary in the service of ideals. All of her essays praised the Führer. The Führer was a sorcerer; nobody doubted that. But when you added poetry to prose, the outcome was a piece of art that made the class grow still. She had a sharp, unerring sense for clarity of words. That's where she really lived.

She fumbled for them now, still in her head, not yet on paper—another tribute to another hero who had laid down his life so that the Russian monster would be slain and the people could prosper and grow.

It must be true what Lilo said of Erika: She was the teacher's pet. She was the smallest one in class, but smart. Her name was on the honor roll repeatedly. Scholastically, there was no doubt she had an edge on Lilo—but Lilo had the necessary energy for pennants and awards in hiking, track and swimming, which counted more than fives.

Still, all in all. When it came to her essays, Erika's feelings were going full blast. She outstripped every classmate in math as well, rarely confusing her percentages with decimals—and she was making perfect grades in racial science also.

For that betokened Apanlee. The moment she thought "Apanlee," the words flowed from her pen, with poetry the consequence.

Ah, Apanlee!

The blessed peace when Apanlee woke up to yet another holy Sunday—and everybody on their knees for morning prayers, wall to wall, to make the future grow! The oval portraits of her Aryan ancestors who for at least four centuries kept pure their Aryan blood!

The details were as sharp as ever. With sentence after sentence, she surrounded herself with her past. When she pulled out all stops, describing the magnificence that racial pride had built, she earned the grades that made the Führer proud.

She clutched her crumpled pillow. Apanlee was where her center was. She was like her Apanlee kin. They were her blood;

she was bone of their bone, will of their will. Before the Beast arrived, in its claws the hammer and sickle, they ruled life on a spectacular scale. She had a history that went back long before Peet Neufeld's wheat became the wonder of the steppe, and centuries before the *Landsers* came and drove the Antichrist back over the horizon.

"The *Landsers* came and stopped at Apanlee, glad for a chance to launder shirts and socks," she wrote on mental slates. "We welcomed them. They honored us. Before they came, my people lived in torment, but when the *Landsers* came, just in the nick of time, the Antichrist was gone. Our life grew calm and orderly."

She paused and savored that. It seemed as if it happened yesterday; it was that vivid. Real.

Before the *Landsers* came to Apanlee, in helmets and high boots, all her memories were vague, but from that day they came into sharp focus, much like the click of heel on heel. She still recalled quite vividly how Jonathan arrived. She still remembered that. She was still small—so small she barely reached his belt, and there were gaps in her front teeth, but overnight she grew a second set, and shortly afterwards, the sunshine was swelling the kernels.

She took a careful gulp of morning air.

No gold could match that splendor. No words touch such a sheen.

"The nights were filled with shooting stars," she wrote, embellishing her fancies. "The days were song and hay. And by the waterhole grew buttercups and daisies. No worms destroyed the harvests—"

Her eyes, still closed, turned liquid at the memory. The waterhole where she could feed the ducks. The summer grain. The scented steppe wind that slammed the door shut on the summer kitchen where Marleen reigned—strong, silent, self-possessed, because there now was order in the universe. And peace. And calm. And sanity. Because all prayers were on schedule.

The baby. Wrinkling when it sneezed. A volley of small

sneezes.

Mimi. A slim young woman in a summer dress, behind each ear a dandelion, with shoes that didn't match. This utter stranger, Mimi, who had felt dead, by her own word, until her gaze fell on her *Landser*, which could mean anything—who did not know just what to do with motherhood and looked at Erika as though she had forgotten having her. That hurt a bit. Not much. She still remembered that—how she had courted Mimi's smile; how she held up her first attempt at knitting to treasure and admire, and Mimi said with a bright smile: "Why, child, that's nice. That's beautiful. Now run along—" and smelled of Sunday afternoon and hay.

Natasha. The busy whoosh of Baba's skirt as she walked her old buckets to the well. Still loyal. Still dependable. Despite arthritic feet.

She missed them all, but how she ached for Baba, replete with a network of wrinkles, dispensing little love pats! She tried to take two deep, full nostrils of the scent that was Natasha at her best and crawled as deeply as she could into her peasant arms that were like hammer locks!—but all she smelled was ashes.

She winced as reality struck.

Berlin was gray with ashes. Berlin lay gutted. Blackened. Crushed. Spring had come at last and everywhere the spaded earth was steaming, which made the ashes worse.

The Führer was right; her dreams were the bane of her life. The radio said as much.

Here's what the broadcast said: "—America has now been carefully maneuvered into a diplomatic corner. The Führer will unleash his generals and strike a secret bargain. As soon as our Führer finds men in bargaining position to see the truth at last—"

She dug herself a little deeper into her feather quilt and, counteracting fear, she dreamed a few more snatches. Cocooning herself, she listened to the voice that kept on pouring from the radio.

"—we don't fear death. We fear life drowned in mediocrity.

The war will end. Our turn will come—" The radio voice was breezy. Out on the roof across the street, a kitten was practicing curling its tail. A sparrow was chasing another. "—the only thing still needing to be done is to convince Americans that they are backing the wrong cause. Though they are sluggish with democracy, unable to absorb the sharpness of the Führer's vision, that will transform the world, there is still hope—"

The secret bargain everybody talked about was the pivotal point. The Führer merely needed to checkmate the shadow government and find himself some honest men who understood that there was nothing to be feared from Germany. And everything from Russia. "—and meanwhile, we are beating off the enemy while taking negligible losses—"

She put both fists against her ears and tried to drift away, but duty was duty, and Wednesday was Wednesday. On Wednesday, she had to line up for the parallel bars. At ten-to-ten, there was a final test in muscle strength, willpower and endurance, and if she missed that test because she dreamed yet one more snatch about the warmth and glory that was Apanlee, the fat was in the fire.

With a small jolt she came alive. She hated the parallel bars. The parallel bars were the worst. Above the door that led into the gym, miraculously saved from bombing damage, the Führer's eagle sat astride his swastika and scowled. She always ducked a bit when she passed underneath.

No way around it, though.

She squinted with one eye; the other had a sty. Gingerly, she put both palms flat on her tender tummy. The strange, sensuous ache of last night was still there.

"It's time. Wake up," called Heidi from the kitchen.

"I will. In just a minute—"

She clutched the brick that Heidi always warmed against malaises of all sorts a little closer to herself and pondered her next move. Self-discipline was all, and that included icy showers in the morning; the *Landsers* were dying on her behalf; it was incumbent upon her to grit her teeth and marshal fortitude,

but temptation was simply too much: compare the world outside scents and sounds of Apanlee when spring began to dress the earth, and her dreams started swarming like bees.

Five minutes left.

Again she was adrift, and all was wondrous beyond words. Ah! Luxury and opulence! She buried her face in the pillow and slid back into a comforting haze. You could no more keep Erika from dreams than you could keep a cloud from raining when she lay snug like that. Outside, the ominous rumbling increased while she lay, still afloat on dreams, much like a butterfly afloat on sunny breezes. Honor, duty and self-sacrifice could wait.

The sun made patterns on the ceiling, throwing sparks that cut small paths of light. For it was spring now, finally, and Easter coming up. The farmers in the suburbs were already piling barrows with manure to help new growth along.

"Maybe my people will arrive today—?" she thought, and added, reaching for a metaphor: "—and if they do, I'll be a merry swallow."

Each day would start like that—with memories that brushed her mind like tiny, gentle feathers. To be a trooper for the Reich was all, and though you tried with all your might, moral toughness was not easy.

"That's what we hope for, don't we, love?" said Heidi only yesterday, while playing diplomat. And Lilo, bringing up the rear, had added loyally: "Stop twitching like a flea. They might be coming. Soon. Could be. In fact, I'm almost sure."

Outside, the war made sounds much like the gurgling of the sea. She pressed her fists to both her eyes and tried distracting herself with additional educational thoughts as the ominous rolling increased.

Three minutes to eight. Three minutes left, deep in the feather quilt, before the morning raids.

She savored every second. She carefully uncurled her toes while bridling that wave of unbearable longing still hanging at the edges of her consciousness. She was a child of war; as such

she had her duties. She did them neatly, without demurring, but in her heart she kept a small blue flame alive: Today might be the day!

For hope was hers. That flame was hers. No one could destroy it.

Here came another day that smelled of fire and burnt flesh, but the swallows were back from the south and the brooms were out in force. The broom maker lady was doing brisk business. The ledgers of this war demanded that you did what others did with fortitude—braving frost, ignoring hunger, ducking enemy fire, standing in the cold and snow for half a pound of herring, flattening yourself against the wall when the worrisome strafing planes came. In a world that bristled with arms, self-discipline was all, and if you didn't come by it naturally, it was incumbent on you to cultivate it diligently. But between wakefulness and sleep, as now, she could indulge a bit; she wanted to be pampered; more so today, in fact, than yesterday.

It would be a magnificent day. The sun warmed the earth. The shrubs in the rubble were in bloom. Despite the bombings and the fires, the tulips burst their buds; romance was in the air; youth was still youth and love was love; that's what the neighbors said.

She listened shakily.

The bombers came and bombed. The anti-aircraft bellowed. The dust flew, and the rubble grew. There was no end to it.

Death came by the clock; in fact, by the minute hand. Death came and left again. And afterwards, somebody you had known and maybe even loved lay at your doorsteps in his blood. You tiptoed gingerly.

A fist clutched at her heart. She tried to breathe against it—breathe hard against the fear. She knew the bombers came at eight and pounded hard to smash the heart of Hitler's Reich, but once they left, at ten to nine, the sky would still be there; the sun would still be laughing; the sparrows once more bathing themselves in the gutters, and Heidi would be tending to her future

garden greens in silent concentration, letting nothing stop her.

That was one of her many traits, worthy of emulation. A neighbor plowed the patch for her, and Heidi started spading. Now the fresh carrots were forming in the soil, and salad leaves were sprouting nicely in three rows.

"Get up now, sleepyhead," called Heidi from the kitchen, a fine impatience in her voice. "It's time. I have a surprise waiting."

That's how she was. From the scent that came wafting your way, you knew that Heidi was at work, a sorceress dispensing comfort, solace and support.

As though this were a day like any other day.

Which it was not.

Awareness started fingering her brain. What was it now? What happened yesterday?

She could hear Heidi in her kitchen, padding about in stockinged feet, cooking sizzling pancakes from potato peelings. Heidi thought of others before she took time for herself.

"If you don't get up now, I'll feed your pancakes to the cats. Come, honey. Just put something decent in your stomach. You'll feel better after breakfast."

Erika sat up in bed, drew the warm blanket up to her chin, and listened, feeling queasy. Something had happened yesterday. Something too huge and horrible for words.

She forced it back. It rose again. No way around the fact—the war was still on at full throttle. The fighting continued; no one knew why. Tomorrow if not earlier, the enemy would throw his arms forever in the nearest ditch, but in the meantime?

Bombs.

For instance, take last night. By the hundreds, American airplanes roared over and emptied their bellies of death. The raid had been so bad, lasting from midnight till four in the morning, that even Lilo started getting ready for the bunkers, something Lilo didn't lightly do in the middle of the night. The night outside throbbed. The search lights fingered the sky in frantic bursts of light. It was pitch-black, just yellow flashes here and there—

but your imagination lent you eyes, you clearly saw the bombs—bomb, bombs and yet more bombs—all falling from the clouds. Two windows in the hall blew in. An extra-sharp explosion blew Winston Churchill right out of Lilo's arms and threw him clear across the kitchen. Outside, the night was lit. Out on the sidewalks, people yelled and ran and fell and died as Allied planes whipped over them and kept on spewing death. You bore down. Hard. You practically bit off your tongue.

"Pretend it's just a thunderstorm," said Heidi tonelessly. "It comes, and it will go away."

Which was impossible! If you pretended that a bombing raid was just a thunderstorm—and not the drone of death sent from the land the Jews controlled while dripping with their diamonds!—sooner or later, you rescued your bearings. She always had before!

Not so last night. Alas. It should have been a raid like any other raid. It wasn't—it was horrid. Awful.

The night was all aflame; the chimney belching like a train; and something spinning in the street much like a worm that had been stepped upon—and when she saw it was the psychic, that's when it happened. Finally. That's when she lost control. Death sent the psychic flying.

And she? She wet herself! Right on the leather couch!

Heidi quickly sat down on the puddle so Lilo wouldn't see; but Lilo saw, her eyes grew wide and she backed off, and Heidi said: "Just never mind. Just never mind. On the brink of eternity, many things are permitted to a mortal—" and helped her strip her skirt.

It happened fast; it took place in a flash; she barely knew how!

A hot tongue of fire unfurled, deep down, inside her belly, and for a whirring moment she thought in utter panic: "That's me! That's it! I have been hit!"

With a small gasp, instinctively, her hands reached for that hidden spot that no one ever saw, and saw that her fingers were red. And that's when Lilo spotted it as well—the bloody panty

stain. Next to the eyelet trim.

"It isn't deadly. Trust me!" said Lilo with a shaky laugh, while Heidi pulled her close and kept on cradling her. She cradled her and cradled her, still as a mouse, eyes closed.

# Chapter 121

That was last night. This was now. Outside, the clouds were growling faintly; the radio was crackling; a street car rattled around corners; the daffodils in Heidi's earthen pots were dancing to the words:

"—the Wehrmacht moves toward a final blow to make this world a better world, a safer world, transformed according to design. We make allowances for temporary losses—"

She slid one last time back into her pillows, pulling the blanket over her ears. The sounds of war were coming closer; she could have prayed; it might have helped; God had a giant ear; it would not hurt to try. Of late she had neglected prayers. It was not easy to resume the habit she left behind at Apanlee, where prayers were the norm.

While she still contemplated prayer—or else a certain nonchalance, perhaps, to beat fate to the punch—a blast nearby shook everything, and one of Heidi's flower pots sailed through the air and landed on the sidewalk with a thud.

That one was close! *Ach Gott!*

A new and strange sensation came slowly into focus. She

was too young to stop the tremble of her chin but much too old to whimper. Lilo had told her with a wink: in good and bad weather, it happened. The bombs had brought it on! Her fear had triggered it!

She pushed away that thought: she was still small and thin.

Not yet! She could not face that yet! She would, in just another minute!

Fear sprang at her and started throttling her. The enemy meant business. She was already feeling smaller than a gnat.

She tried to pull the quilt over her ears, while her heart began thumping in terror. From outside came a roar, next followed by a rumbling sound that made her think a train was rolling by, horizon to horizon. Something had started oozing, like toothpaste squeezed out of a tube. She crossed her legs. It didn't help; it oozed.

She saw that she was lying smack in Heidi's bed. Alone. What was she doing here? Why had she slept in Heidi's bed? Had Lilo left for class?

It was like a nest, Heidi's bed. Heidi was known for her nests; she made nests for young chicks to keep warm through the night; she made nests for the cat to have kittens. Now Erika remembered, quaking inside as a dim but painful memory came slowly into focus: last night, Heidi quietly made a nest for her as well so she could lick her wounds in privacy for having done the monumental worst—when that big bomb came sailing down, she had disgraced herself by peeing in her bloomers.

She held her breath until the rolling stopped. She pressed both fists against her ears and tried to muffle it.

She counted. One. Two. Three.

Ah! Not this time. Not she. Next door the psychic, yesterday. Not she.

While the rumbling turned into concussions, she raised herself on her left elbow and peered through a slit in the door, but Lilo was up and was gone. The thunder increased and the rumble grew worse. It came from the clouds; it bounced off the face of the clear morning sun that kept laughing at her through the

window. Above it all, Heidi's calm voice floated in the air in small, caressing waves.

"Come, honey. Hurry up. Don't worry about being late. I've already written an excuse. Lilo will give it to the teacher."

The floor began to throb, then hammer in familiar rhythm. Something nearby came crashing down. There was a roar and then a rumble. Then plaster dust. The smell of ashes. Chalk. And yet, today as any other day: against the malice of the universe, Heidi was steaming up the kitchen.

With care, she poked one toe from beneath her quilt and pondered her next step. She might as well clench jaw on jaw and take that icy shower that Lilo always praised to heaven for its enormous benefits to health, willpower, and longevity, and hope it would wash away shame.

There had been three alerts last night; no one had bothered to undress—and here they were again! Another blast!

The sirens gave warnings; the populace ran. A streetcar came careening by, its running boards seeded with terrified people, while in a thick and bulging cloud, smoke rolled around the corner.

Three long wails: death was coming closer.

Repeated hysterical shrieks: the bombs were just about here.

The bed frame started shaking as though a giant rattled it. There was no end to it. The air was howling like a witches' Sabbath. "No, honey! No!" shushed Heidi.

The portraits of her martyred sons, clad splendidly in uniform, fell from their nails and shattered on the floor, in front of Heidi's feet, and Heidi flinched as though she had been struck but merely closed her eyes. The house began to sway, and lumps of plaster started falling from the ceiling. The shrieking lasted on and on; next came the heavy stuff for Erika, the retching and the throwing up, but Heidi had a towel ready, and Heidi held her head.

But then a gust of wind blew in fresh air, and Heidi gave her a small pat, returning to her stove, while Erika fished for her slippers underneath her bed and started looking for the cats the

grocer left behind.

She gingerly stepped over Winston Churchill who lay, his tail flush with the floor, stretched out like a nonchalant Indian, now that the raid was over, and went into the kitchen. There, Heidi fussed with the potato batter and would not turn around. She merely asked with gentle gravity as Erika sat down: "How are you feeling, darling?"

"I'm better."

"Good. That's good."

"I overslept."

"That's quite all right."

"I'm sorry, Heidi. Truly."

"I said it's quite all right."

"Has Lilo left?"

"Yes. She's gone."

Pure Heidi, all of it. Not one small word about the accident last night! The kitchen smelled like Saturday. Now was the time to gather up your courage to ask a few more questions to clear up the remaining mystery if only you knew how.

"Today," said Heidi, her face averted still, her voice so low and level that it was barely audible, "it doesn't matter if you're late. We have to talk. Just you and I."

Erika felt her face grow pink. She kept on glancing sideways.

"Let's take our time. Let's you and I discuss it—"

"All right, " said Erika. To say that she felt awkward was putting it politely. She watched as Heidi finished cooking breakfast between far, faint explosions, determined and composed, wearing her checkered apron that smelled of her hot iron. Her hair was braided evenly; her eyes were warm and patient.

"See, darling, when I was your age—" said Heidi bravely, and then stared straight ahead. Deep lines now marked her face, so dear, devoid of any doubt. This would be difficult, but Heidi, being Heidi, would finish what she meant to say. And so she said in one brave rush:

"Today is special, darling. As sacred as a songfest. What happened isn't harmful to your health."

"I know."

"It's the heartbeat of nature," said Heidi. "Will you be so kind as to hand me the salt?"

"I know most everything there is to know," said Erika with clumsy bravado and started pulling at her sweater, frayed at the cuff and tight around her ribcage.

"Here, honey. Blow your nose. Come, sit here next to me. Now is as good a time as any. Let's now discuss this fully. If you don't mind, that is."

"I don't mind. Lilo told me—" She swallowed and turned crimson. "I'm sorry. I just couldn't—" She struggled down the knot of shame, confusion and distress that rose within her throat, sad that the small reprieve was gone. "I stayed up way too long. Way past the time the broadcaster —" If anybody understood, then Heidi understood. She, too, kept looking for small loopholes and excuses.

"A holiday is coming up," said Heidi with a sigh. "You'll catch up then. I know you will. You're quick. A holiday can always—" She stopped short there, and Erika felt that hard knot deep in her own throat swell with the inner pain she sensed in Heidi now and took on as her own.

For Heidi did not say: "The Führer's birthday." She just stared straight ahead.

The words hung in the air. Last year, she would have said that.

She would have pointed out this was a war of pride and spirit. She would have added briskly that the marches, hikes, parades and military drills, planned to celebrate the Führer's special day, gave extra luster to the cause that would be won, no matter what. No matter what the price. No matter what the sacrifice. But those three satin stripes on Heidi's sleeve changed everything.

"Let's have that talk," said Heidi now. "Just you and I. Nobody else will know. Here's what I think. What do you think? Maybe we should start thinking of a bra?"

Her words were rich and warm, like lentil soup on a grim day, and Erika relaxed a bit and started feeling better.

"Here's what I meant to tell you," elaborated Heidi, nudging herself ahead. "I need to tell you now because I have a feeling—" Her eyes were blind. They stared into a distance. She gave herself a small, decisive jolt. "You're growing up. You'll fall in love. You'll be affecting future generations. Their happiness will be diminished if you are careless with your gifts. Now let's get down to common sense. Your body is your temple. The first rule is to keep it pure and clean. Somewhere I read: 'Man is a bridge, and not a goal.' I think that's beautiful. Don't you?"

"I guess."

"Right now, you are too young to be in love, but one day you will know. Here's what I'm telling you: You have been given countless tools to make the best out of your opportunities. Love is just one of them. Don't count on love alone. It can be treacherous. Count on your mind as well. The day you find a man to love—be careful, darling. Careful. Love's just a stepping stone that nature handed you. It can be slippery. Be sure that it is firm. You have a creed. You have a clan. You are an Aryan."

"I know. I learned all that."

"What counts is what comes after you. The generations that come after you. You think you're you? You aren't you. You're just a speck of duty attached to a great will. A cosmic will. You are the end result of countless generations who walked this earth before you did. They crafted you. You're in their debt—just as they owed the ones who lived and died before they did. We owe the ones before us."

"That's what the teacher said. In *Rassenkunde* class."

"He's right. He's absolutely right. Your thoughts, your wants, your dreams, your likes and your dislikes are all connected to your body. Let no one tell you differently. You have blue eyes. That is no accident. A farming dynasty gave them their hues—a color borrowed from the sky. You have fair skin, blond hair. It's beautiful."

Now Heidi took a strand of hair of Erika's and curled it gen-

tly in her fingers, while adding very softly: "It took millennia to make it shine like gold. You are so lucky, Erika. Your forebears were remarkable. Trailblazers. Movers. Doers. Settlers. Your folks were pioneers—"

At that, the youngster flushed with pleasure, for Heidi talked of Apanlee, and nothing could have suited better. She never tired hearing of it—the place that race had built.

"Your ancestry? The best. Achievement won them self-respect—not bargaining and bartering. You come from folks who had their values straight. They knew their worth. They didn't need a slew of shyster lawyers to sort out right from wrong. A handshake was enough. They sank their roots into the bedrock of their values; that's why you have that inborn strength of mind. It didn't come out of the air. The sparrows didn't carry it. It grew from discipline."

All that. She exhaled carefully. She knew all that—that's where her center was. That's where she lived, where she belonged, among the people whom she knew so well, all following the Gospel in silence to the letter, paying respect to old family values, binding the sheaves, living their work-callused lives as close to the earth as they could.

"Your people didn't wait for accidents. They sought a cleaner life. A richer earth. They passed their love for work on to their children. Commitment. Quality. Perfection. Your blood contains their history. Their world was rich and good until the Moloch came and tried to swallow it. Their life was seamless and well-ordered until—"

There was a pause. It stretched and stretched. It seemed as though Heidi had changed her mind and might not, after all, go on, but Heidi faced her fully.

"—until the howl arose: Equality! What mockery! What travesty! You're too young to understand this now, but one day you will know. Here's what I'm telling you, for nothing could be more important: those words are remote from the Aryan mind. As remote as the Kingdom of Judah."

Now Erika was really pricking up her ears, for Heidi hardly

ever spoke unkindly of either man or beast. She sought the best that human beings had to offer and lived accordingly—kind even to the weatherbeaten spinster whose head ached, day and night. But Heidi now was on a roll and would let nothing stop her.

"We must seek truth from facts. We can't depend on slogans. Some people claim this is about the click of heel on heel, but that's not it at all. It's not that we're the best. It's that we are the first to want to be the best, and that takes discipline. There is a price for what we want. That price is steep. Perfection can't be had for free. We are the first who said: 'We'll pay. No price is steep enough.'"

At that, she bent and picked the portraits of her fallen sons out of the shards of glass and said without a tremor:

"This isn't about superiority. It's about inequality. We won't stay down and shuffle. We will not genuflect. We choose to lift ourselves. We say 'No!' to a world that's as sick as a worm-eaten apple and as smelly as yesterday's socks. We dislike usury. We hate corruption. Waste. We want a healthy world. No rotten teeth, enormous warts. We don't want to spread disease the way mongrels pass on to each other their fleas. A life without hard rules is hardly any life worth living. That is my firm opinion. We want a healthy earth. We don't want cities black with soot. We don't want people mating motley-style until the world is gray on gray and all distinction gone. Nobody argues that an ass should be a horse. Nobody doubts there is a difference between a thoroughbred and a mule. If you ask me, there is a clear-cut difference between a sheep dog and a poodle. Let poodle mate with poodle."

While Erika sat, wide-eyed, slurping her ersatz coffee, Heidi continued firmly, facing her:

"I'll never understand why they should hate us so for our self-esteem. They say we are too proud—as though that were a stain. Why shouldn't we be proud, since it has cost us plenty? Of course we're proud. There is no limit to our pride. It's the prerequisite for getting anywhere."

"I bet they never thought it through—" Particularly, the

Americans.

"Of course they didn't. They were fools. And it will cost them plenty. They're perfectly willing to spend millions on improving the bloodlines of their horses—yet not one cent on their own young. That's their business, I suppose. But see? It isn't our business. Their bloodlines won't be clean. Ours will be clean, and getting cleaner. Why is that thought so threatening? Use your imagination. You know what Yahweh said—the God of Israel? 'Do not eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.' I've always asked: 'Why not?' What is it about evil that shuns examination? The blaze of sun may be too hot for maggots underneath a rock. It's nature for a flower."

The world no longer smelled of mildew, cigarette stubs, and kerosene. It smelled of spring, and Heidi filled her lungs:

"Here's what I'm telling you. It's up to you. Few will be left when this horrendous massacre is over. I have a feeling you'll be left. And I don't ever want you to forget: the sparkle of life comes only from bodies and minds that are clean. I know that I'm saying it badly, but what I'm telling you is this: you're moral if you obey nature. There is no other way. Nature has put its fingerprint on you—its racial fingerprint. And if you violate that fingerprint, if you blot out that fingerprint. then nature knows. And it will cost you plenty. You'll lose what's best in you. You lose what's clear and sharp in you. You'll give up your identity. You'll be like a plant without light. If you don't value what you are—precisely who you are, an Aryan!—you're stepping off the ladder that your forebears built for you. As you descend, illness rises. As smut grows, beauty wilts. There's no equality in nature. There's only love of order, symmetry and strength. Nature is truth, no matter what the slogans. Nature scorns everything alien. Equality is alien. If you decide to violate nature, the children you'll bear will be handed a bill for what you forsook. The world you forfeited. For slogans. Don't do it, Erika. Don't ever let self-serving people paw your soul by palming off their slogans. You have a mind. You've got a brain. At least write your own script. While there is time. While you still can. For it could

happen that—"

She stared into the distance with wide, unseeing eyes. But then she leaned forward into a small nod:

"One way or another, this war must end, but that's not the last word on the matter. The next war has already begun. The coming war will sap our blood for alien interests until we get things straight. We must start somewhere, darling. We must love health over sickness. Mind over money. Light over dark. Grace over smut. We must declare precisely what's grotesque, and what is beautiful. With all the strength at our command, we must hate everything that's hideous and love that which is lovely. A dauber should not have the right to call himself an artist. A flaccid mind can't shine a beam of thought. I know that there are people in this world attached to the opposite view. What of them? Ask yourself. These people are our enemies. They love their money more than self-respect. With us, it's the other way around. We're paying for our principles. We're paying with our children's blood. That will not be ignored."

The clouds were soft. The air was warm. And Heidi finished quietly:

"Why do they prattle on about free choice and not let us choose our way of life? Let them choose darkness over light. Lies over truth. Death over life. We choose the opposite, thanks to a man who believes in the light, and who trusts his fists—and just marvel at what he accomplished, in such a short time! For six short years, there was more sky in Germany than anywhere else in the world. And, briefly, our Fatherland lay in triumphant beauty. There walked among us one courageous man who said: 'There is the path. Light over darkness. Truth over lies. Life over death. Cleanliness rather than filth.' That's why they warred on us—"

Erika dared barely breathe as she watched Heidi finish. They shared each other's thoughts. They shared them with their eyes. Now Heidi's voice turned hard.

"We will not win this war. Nature will win this war. Nature will make short shrift. They hated us. They hate us still. And I don't mean our Aryan brothers. They're only tools. They're not

the source. The source has groundhog teeth. A hundred thousand teeth. If you permit it, Erika, they'll gnaw out every root. They'll strip you of your heritage. Why? Let me tell you why. That's where your strength is. In your past. In Aryan history. The source knows that. The source fears our sense of ancestry much as the devil fears the crucifix. You must add your small voice to the struggle. A bomb may flatten a roof, but it can't flatten the truth. It can't kill truth drawn from the heart of nature. Truth can't be burned. The Führer spoke. The word is out. It's traveling the universe."

Heidi fastened her gaze on the portraits, and her eyes were two puddles of blue. Her sons smiled back at her, and Heidi turned a little more transparent than she already was, but letting nothing stop her.

"The earth drank the blood of my sons. They fought like lions, but they fell, because the enemy succeeded in setting brother against brother. Only an Aryan nation such as America could have defeated them. My sons sank back into the earth that gave them life, but not before they gave their best. In legal tender. Honest coin. Their brief existence filled our Fatherland with pride. Their sacrifice will count."

It was a weighty speech. What Heidi said, people took willingly for gospel, and Erika did, too. She listened and took it all in.

"Some people may forget. The earth never forgets. No matter how our enemies distort what this was all about—my sons died honestly. They gave their life for freedom. Freedom from ugliness. Freedom from pain. From usury. From mind control that tells you straight is crooked. One day good people will start looking for the source of all of this because they'll grasp there is no other choice. One day the world will know. One day the world will understand why we were called to sacrifice. The Führer did. He understood. He took his dagger to the boil and tried to lance the abscess. And I will tell you this: Whatever its name, it exploits the goodwill of the people. It sinks its spurs in the flanks of the world while howling Liberty! Equality! Fraternity! What

bloodshed those three words unleashed! This war won't have a happy ending. And more is yet to come. What comes will be appalling. But let me tell you this, for I may never have another chance, what with—"

At that, Heidi looked as though she were ascending a scaffold, but Heidi was Heidi, and duty was duty, and finish she would, which she did.

She sat down on the edge of the chair. She told the blushing youngster startling things between deep sighs and many pauses. And here is how she finished:

"This isn't our war. It never was. This war became a fratricidal war because the enemy probed for our underbelly, and found our weakest spot. We can't relate to selfless violence, the mandate now before us. We don't think warlike thoughts. It isn't in our nature. We're plowers. Tinkerers. Inventors. We're artisans. We honor soil. We strive to reach the stars. We have this weakness, though: we buy into the slogans. Somebody else's slogans. I know this isn't our war. It is a war of beings. And it's cracking the skulls of small babies. America? Their bombs won't win this war. They'll win a battle, not a war. This war has already wounded their spirit, for melting down what nature handed them—their racial heritage—is not the way to go. Here's what I ask of you. I'm asking you to wait. I'm asking you to guard yourself so as to guard the future. Nature is working to build its best. Nature is busy perfecting itself. One day you will love deeply. And when you find a man you love, he'll ask for an unsullied bride. In fair exchange, he'll treat you with quiet courtesy. You'll be his source of joy. He'll be your source of safety. He'll cherish you and love you. Because you're valuable. One worthy man. One wedding ring. A life that's honest, simple, clean and smooth—that's happiness."

Ah, happiness. That's all she wanted. Happiness. Relief and gratefulness washed over Erika like a warm, cresting wave. She felt as though she had been knighted. That ache inside was a decided mystery, but this she took on Heidi's word: it was all natural.

"Just one last thought. If you are careful with the gifts your forebears gave to you, it means you're opting for a solid life. You'll have a life composed of dignity. You'll be rich beyond all words, because you do what's right. If you start sabotaging nature, you do so at your peril. When darkness overtakes the will, that's when the war is lost. If you are careless with your gifts, you only have yourself to blame. When you look in the mirror then, you'll stare at the face of a stranger. What will stare back at you out of your mirror, Erika, will be somebody you once knew. That will be a sad day."

Now Heidi dropped her voice a little more and spoke of this and that while Erika sat listening, still queasy with untried emotions. She had no counter-argument. She opened her heart wide and let the rules flow in. They fit what she had always known, but now they shone like gold.

The morning was young still, bluish with sunshine and wind; spring was already here, practically half-gone, summer just around the corner. A cat sat on the fence and curled its tail coquettishly.

"Here are two safety pins," said Heidi in the end. "And here is the key to your drawer. You are a woman now. You are entitled to your privacy. No one can take from you what generations handed you unless you put your reasoning on hold. Unless you throw away your instincts. Your body is your forebears' gift. Treat it with reverence. It has been dearly bought. It's beautiful. Exquisite. Unless you give consent, the enemy can't blur what nature made distinct. Not without penalty. You are an Aryan. You have great worth. You're not like anybody else. Not in my book you aren't. I will not hear a word of it. I am completely disgusted by those who say you are."

That's how that morning ended—with dappled sunshine on the floor, the bombers gone, the sparrows splashing in the puddles, the tulips fat with sap.

There was a future still. She now had Heidi's word: she would be safe and clean—as long as she refrained from doing the unspeakable.

And what that was, to be precise, she still had no idea.

# Chapter 122

For weeks, there had not been one single normal day; the bombings never stopped; the horror didn't end—yet still some street cars ran, sporadically, and Erika hoped fervently she could catch one, to make up for lost time.

That morning, she had missed two tests already; if she didn't make it to the finals, scheduled before one o'clock, it might mean extra work—logging hours at the Winter Help, perhaps, sluggish now that a much-belated spring had finally arrived, or spending weekends helping register the refugees who kept on pouring in, a ghostly stream of human misery, flowing silently into the twisted girders, broken glass, and ashen rubble of Berlin.

She liked to help; she didn't really mind, but she was feeling queasy still, and not for minor cause. The measure of one's character, the teacher always said, was social usefulness, but even so, she was hoping for reprieve in silence somewhere, by herself, to sort out Heidi's words.

That was what counted. Social usefulness. Your private self was of no consequence at all. The teacher always spoke these

words with worship radiating from his face while standing on one leg, down on his luck. Half of his body ended at the hips, and sometimes he would give himself a mocking smile and claim it was impossible for him to step on people's toes. Her classmates always laughed, but she was was too jittery to laugh. She hated it when he made jokes about his injury. To have to leave a leg in Russia was serious.

As she stepped out into the street, she blinked and took quick stock, then breathed a sigh of relief: it looked like an average raid. No worse, in any case, than yesterday. She had expected much more damage.

She drew in her breath and kept walking, occasionally coughing from her lungs the dust that still fell from the shuddering walls. Today was standard fare. Something lay curled about the gutter, face buried in the mud, palms up, still in its shrapnel-riddled overcoat. A pretty blue. Remarkably new. Thank heaven no one she knew.

There was another one. A third.

She would not call them corpses; that would make it gross. She gave them sideways glances.

She kept on breathing evenly and kept on walking gingerly, as though across a balance beam. The skies were clear again, the bombers gone; a cat was catching flies; billowy ridges piled on the horizon; the air smelled of April and Easter.

And then she spied the child.

On blistered knees, a small and half-charred infant was crawling slowly from the debris of a demolished house. It seemed dazed, but made no sound, not a peep. It struggled to free itself of the ashes.

"A stretcher! A stretcher!" she yelled. She yelled at the top of her lungs. She nearly broke a vessel. The infant crawled toward her, in slack motion, and then it coiled up, in a small quivering heap, still stirring drowsily.

With flying fingers, Erika took off her sweater and made a small nest for its head, not knowing what else she could do, except to shoo the April flies—until, at last, a neighbor came run-

ning up and scooped up the infant with low, compressed moans, making soft, sucking sounds in her throat. At that, she took her sweater back, relieved, and started looking for the morning streetcar to take her to her class.

Now she was really late!

What would the teacher say? Where was that tardy trolley?

She knew her classmates were, by now, immersed in geometric proofs. Geometry was an important subject, a definite prerequisite to help rebuild the world. She was quite good, though not exceptional, at geometric proofs, for there was nothing interesting in angles. With words that ruled both thoughts and feelings, she was exceptional.

"What? Are you crazy? Move!"

A uniformed truck driver honked at her and shook his fist at her. She hung her head. She didn't ask why he was blue with rage; perhaps she hadn't given right-of-way?

"Heil Hitler," whispered Erika, and turned another corner.

There was the streetcar, finally—-exactly where it should have been, but toppled over, gutted. The conductor lay dead in a doorway, a horse smile on his face. Last week, he had tugged at her pigtails. His arm had been torn off, revealing a raw muscle. She circumvented him, sidestepping an enormous pothole, her stomach tightening with bile, glad when another trolley car came clattering along, sounding like Heidi's old sewing machine, lacking oil, down to its very last needle.

She knew it wouldn't stop. She braced herself to jump. The wartime streetcars never stopped when they were packed with people. You leaped; you took your chances, adroitly aiming for the narrow running board, hoping for a foothold.

That's what she did; she leaped. "Heil Hitler," she muttered, while struggling aboard and inside.

"Look. Look what the beans did last night," somebody said and glared at her sharply as though it were her fault. She panted for breath while the streetcar careened. "Heil Hitler!" she repeated loudly.

Nobody bothered to answer her greeting. The streetcar kept wobbling and jerking. She tried to hold on with both hands, her textbooks clasped under her arm, while leaning side to side. Huge, silent people fell against her, crushing her—a mass of human flesh, all smelling of the bunkers, all threadbare at the cuffs and collars. Great gusts of ashes, chalk, and smoke filled up her nostrils. She sneezed into somebody's midriff violently.

"Excuse yourself!"

"Excuse me, please! Oh, please!" It was uncivilized to be barbarian in manners. She would have curtsied, had only there been room to curtsy properly, but people stood pressed against each other like spoons, and it was hard to make out any rhyme or reason why everybody was so mad.

One woman was already screaming. She flung wild bursts of words. "Three sons! Three sons!" she shrieked.

"Shhh! Quiet!"

"One fell. Another drowned. The last one vanished without a trace at Stalingrad—"

The people kept bobbing their heads. Well. Look at us. Not one of us who does not walk in mourning.

Each day it was the same—more casualties, and still more casualties, no end to casualties. Long lists were published in the papers, black borders around names. The one-legged teacher cut them out and pinned them to the wall.

This was war. It took its toll, demanded sacrifice. You shared your ration cards and sorrows.

There was, by then, hardly a family in all of Germany who didn't have a picture, black-bordered, sitting on a dresser. What was another death? The future would be born—a future natural and plain, a future good and nourishing, like thick and steaming pea soup, with chunks of beef and ham.

She bit her lip. The earth outside was steaming.

The postfrau on the pitted sidewalk heaved a huge sack, and here was yet another private thought she tasted gingerly. Which was: you were allowed to grieve a certain measure and no more—just as you were allowed your rations in meat, margarine, and

coal.

Excessive grief was uncouth. Unbecoming. No wonder that the woman screamed and did not want to stop.

"Mind if I sit?" asked Erika, and slid into somebody's lap. Here was another wartime benefit; adults reached out for children everywhere and put them in their laps; no matter what their flaws. The one in whose soft lap she settled was looking gray and gaunt—a frozen face, a sloping chin, eyes sunk into her forehead, just munching on her gums and making slurping noises.

"The city has run out of coffins," she said, her old arms tightening.

"Yet we will win," one of the passengers replied, as they kept ratting through the ruins.

He had an empty sleeve. His eyes shimmered with fervor. The words came of themselves; he aimed to please the Führer.

No one said a word.

A rusty old commuter train passed by, garlanded with the Hooked Cross and the Red Cross in alternate design. More coming from the Eastern front. More. Even more. They poured into the rubble of Berlin as though from gray conveyer belts.

All refugees, escaping.

Everyone who still had legs was running from the Reds. Goats. Horses. People. Everything. This train was full of them; she craned her head habitually. Amid the flotsam of the great migrations fleeing from the Soviet terror might be someone she knew.

"My family is coming," she said, and started hiccuping and twitching.

"Stop that," somebody bellowed angrily, which made her hiccups worse. Like lava coming down a mountain and taking over everything, her words kept spilling out. "It's been two years. I still remember them. My mother. *Oma.* Jonathan. Natasha. The only person blurry is the baby—"

"They're dead. All dead."

"Shut up!"

"The Russians cut out everybody's tongue—" the screaming

woman sobbed, now with surprising venom. "I know that for a fact."

"I said shut up!" The one-armed passenger spoke sharply, not mincing any words, and put his one remaining hand on Erika's.

"It's true. I heard that yesterday. They're animals. Just animals. They lop off certain parts of your anatomy—" The woman's shrill voice broke in one last somersault. It was clear her mind had snapped.

The stranger kept his hand on hers. His touch was kind and cordial. "Hush, child. Pay no mind whatsoever. What does she know? I bet you that your family will walk right over burning coals to make it to Berlin."

If nothing else, then stubbornness. She took a deep and trembling breath. She stared out of the window. Since there was nothing else to do, you clung to your beliefs. The cold, white days were past. The sun was shining merrily. She whispered, since her voice was gone: "I know that they are coming. I know that for a fact."

"Where from? From Pomerania?" the stranger asked, his hand still on her twitching fingers. "I heard a special train is scheduled late today. A special train from Pomerania—"

Let him think that, she thought, in no position to dispute that speculation. Here was another matter to consider. To say, "—from Russia" left guesses as to loyalty wide open.

This she had learned since she arrived.: to have been born within the Greater Reich gave a decided edge.

"Pah! Just in time for Adolf's birthday—" the angry woman rider said cynically, and fixed a baleful eye. "Why do we get served up this poppycock? You tell me that. When will it end? When is enough enough? It's poppycock. You heard me. I said poppycock. Plain poppycock!"

"At least she's not afraid," thought Erika. Who was this woman? A defeatist? Giving everyone the lip? Had she been Lilo and not Erika, she would have glared at the betrayer or, at the very least, cold-shouldered her. But she was Erika. Not Lilo.

Within her stomach, something tightened like a fist that was

half fear, half glee. A boil was throbbing to be lanced. She felt a surge of kinship. She kept her eyes demurely in her lap and hoped the woman would say more. She looked as though she might.

"So! Why not cut our losses graciously? The war is lost. It's just a matter of admitting—"

The woman's body shook with silent sobs. Nobody said a word. The streetcar picked up speed again, and Erika stared out of cracked and blinded windows, while skeletons of building after building coasted by.

Entire streets, just piles of brick and mortar!

Berlin resembled a relief map of the moon. All shell holes. Crusted crater tops. She longed to speak up fearlessly—just once, just loud enough above the tortured hooting of the train that carried half-dead people, a horror graven in their faces no soap and water could wash off. But just in time she stopped.

"A stone pile is a stone pile," she thought that day, speaking only to herself. " A hero is a hero. A bomb is a bomb, and a bullet a bullet. War is war, and duty is duty. You learn to dot your i's and cross your sevens properly, and you close ranks with people next to you. On one-pot Sundays, you just go hungry and say nothing. That's what it's all about. It's about comradeship. Your place among your kin."

That was, as Lilo would have said, reality. You did what must be done. You didn't complain and contaminate others by spreading defeat and disgust. For this was still your Fatherland. No matter what, it was your Fatherland. You did the best you could.

"I'll have to find the proper words to summarize all that," she thought, but nothing came to mind that might have fit this wasteland, life blown to smithereens by bombs out of America. To give this wasteland meaning was now the task at hand.

She kept knitting her brow and crossing her legs; if she opened her mouth and said what she thought, she, too, would be a public nuisance. But on the other hand, no one could steal her dreams. Like a flight of wild geese were her dreams.

The year was still young. The mist still hung over the earth.

The past week had been chaos, but now it seemed at last the sun was here to stay.

She was a grown-up now. Sort of. Just barely. No one knew she was not yet fourteen.

Maybe somewhere in the years ahead there would be someone waiting to solve this morning's mystery, this bittersweet enigma that Heidi had called womanhood—a man like Jonathan, perhaps. Wholesome and manly. Strong. Not missing this or missing that. With good hands, gentle words and splendid teeth and showers of warm smiles.

Could be. If luck was on her side.

In silence, she rode through the smoldering ruins, a quiet, obedient young Hitler girl, hands folded neatly in her lap.

# Chapter 123

Erika held out her palm for the ruler, but the teacher was in a benevolent mood; he merely motioned with his chin: "Sit down and pay attention. We're on page eleven."

She quietly slid into her seat, her ears perked up for snickers. She dreaded snickers; always had. Certain bullies had perfected them. There was a boy in class with carrot hair and freckles who kept his yellow eye on her—he was the worst; if he decided on a target, the mob gave chase; his victim was the lowest creature on the totem pole for weeks.

"Are you okay?" asked Lilo, rubbing her own tummy. Her eyes were pools of mirth.

"Shhh. Yes."

It seemed no one suspected anything. Lilo had kept her secret. You could depend on Lilo. Here was the perfect Hitler girl straight from the slickest poster: bronzed as a coffee bean and lissome in her gestures, slim as an elm, just as symmetrical, devoted to the cause. On her lapel she wore a magnificent swastika pin. No matter what the news from the disintegrating front, the *Landsers* winked at her. No matter how it drizzled, how dark

and glum the sky, she sang at full volume to cheer up the rest. She marched with sharp precision, always, and she donated her allowance willingly to aid the Winter Help, for Lilo's private self was of no consequence.

But she was choosy as to her bosom buddies. She did not carry charity too far. She met her enemies head-on; she picked and chose her comrades. Her special favorites were worthy of attention. And Erika was one of them. To have this strong girl on her side was everything.

"Have I got a surprise for you!" hissed Lilo now, near bursting with importance, and Erika tried hiding her curiosity by studying her nails.

Lilo was a specialist in secrets. She had one now. Behind her hand, she whispered: "You'll never guess. You're the only one who'll know!"

She signaled several cues to Erika, who tried her best to not start grinning, ear to ear, but pay, instead, attention to the teacher, who launched himself with vigor into his daily litany. He lectured from the heart while standing on one leg, resting his stump on the crook of his crutch.

"—our soldiers fight with courage and endurance. Can we do less? Our soldiers fight for honor at a time when few men know the meaning of the word. For instance, take the Treaty of Versailles—"

The youngsters treated him respectfully. They stood when he entered the room; they sat when he told them to sit. He didn't have to strive for discipline; few teachers, even the substitutes, had problems. The rowdies all bowed from the waist, even the fanatic gymnast who could not take his eyes off Lilo's sweater, but kept on teasing Erika to tears.

"—against that kind of barbarism, boys and girls, unleashed by Hebrew avarice against our Fatherland, it follows that you have a special duty to your country—"

Good will and courtesy demanded that you heard him out, since he had paid his price with his poor leg he'd left behind in Russia, and so they did, each morning after civics and just before

geometry. This, Erika did gladly; it was the least that she could do, although she knew it all by heart. She had rehearsed the message many times. She knew about the Jewish vices, theoretically. No matter how you slammed the door, the Jews were dense that way; they always reappeared. Unless you checked them thoroughly and kept tight rein on them, they sowed their seeds of discontent among the foolish masses. If there was no one else on whom to play a trick, they tricked each other, practicing. Their rabbis killed puppies. Their bankers crushed farmers. All that. The teacher might as well have talked about the Hottentots, however. She, Erika, had never met one in the flesh. The yellow benches for the Jews set up in parks were long since gone; not even by sight did she know any Jew, nor did she know of anyone who did.

The Jews she visualized were pale and distant, like the moon. Berlin was free of Jews, as far as she could tell; the Führer had carted them off.

"Had it not been for Franklin Rosenfeld in the employ of usurers and bankers," the teacher said, his voice now rising sharply, "the enemy fronts would have crumbled by now. But all that will change. Now, finally, the tide of war will turn. He's dead. The skunk is dead! The lackey of the Jews is dead. Franz Rosenfeld is dead. This morning, early, news came by special dispatch."

There was mild, dutiful applause. Ho! Ho! The Jewish dog is dead!

The teacher's cheeks were red. "There's still America. This is their chance. This is their opportunity. Now they will recognize the real enemy. They'll side with us. Now they will learn their lesson. They will identify what's ailing all of them. Their country? Run by parasites. All of them, parasites! Each one of them! With no exception! None! All clinging to the backs of decent working people. Just you remember that. Now, boys and girls. Let's do percentages. A desperate farmer needed to take out a loan—"

"I'll give you a hint," Lilo hissed and raised a practiced brow.

Her wide-eyed stare filled everything. "It starts with a 'J.' You are the only one who'll know."

"Shhh! Stop it, Lilo. Now!" This was their secret contest: who would blink first and lose the staring game?

"—a Jew lent the farmer the money at thirteen percent for three years. Use the columns on page eight to figure out how much the honest farmer has been robbed. You have ten minutes. Do your best. Then we'll start on decimals."

Erika tried to pay attention, but the night before was like lead in her bones. Through all last week, the raids had been savage; the Amis were pounding Berlin at the Hebrews' behest; the underground bunkers never quite emptied, but victory was just around the corner, and decimals, percentages and fractions were the agenda now. Maybe she could still sneak a little snooze? Lilo often napped in class, having perfected that skill, among many.

"You keep your pencil between thumb and pinkie. See?" Lilo had instructed her just yesterday. "And when it drops, that startles you. That's when you snap awake—"

Lilo was still staring. She kept on staring tauntingly at Erika, who stared right back to strengthen her own stare. Out of the corner of her eye she realized the teacher suddenly looked gray. His voice was no longer his own. Still, he kept pushing on; a lesson was a lesson.

"The Age of Truth is dawning. We shall revamp the world. We'll do it, bit by bit." His stump must give him pain; his face was ashen now. "A land of mental mongrels, boys and girls, ruled by maneuvered vote. This is what you must understand. That's where the evil sits. It's in their voting system. Right in their voting system. They have two candidates, one in each pocket of their trousers. They say: 'You have a choice. Pick one.' The Hebrews own the press. The Hebrews own the radio. That's why it so convenient, so easy to deceive the gullible—"

It wasn't that she disagreed; no one disagreed. She knew about the usurers. You couldn't trust a Jew with any money, ever—but who had money these sad days? That was her sole demurrer. Her small allowance didn't count, too small even to

salt away pennies. And even if one earned some extra cash by sweeping out a neighbor's cellar, one needed special coupons to purchase anything.

A ration card was currency. A cigarette stub was gold.

She leaned toward Lilo and muttered: "I overslept. I don't know how that happened."

Lilo swung one leg across the other while fishing for a pencil stub. There was a twinkle in her eye. She seemed to say: "As if I didn't know. As good a ruse as any."

"—the only thing we need is for America to wake up to its interests, which might be easier said than done. For sadly, their pet citizens, that vile and vicious tribe, control the press and, hence, all thought, and therefore the Americans will swallow every bit of filth about our Führer their papers and their radios pour forth."

What were they to make of America? Little.

The slow were rewarded; the bright were kept down. The lazy were coddled; the diligent punished with taxes. Just gush and slush, America. No spine.

"A foolish, uncouth land," the teacher lectured in a monotone while glancing at his notebook to fortify himself. "They need us more than we need them. They'll need us more tomorrow than we need them today. They'll join us soon. Together, we'll build a strong bulwark on which the Red Peril will break every tooth—"

The classroom smelled of chalk. The windows were still closed against the biting April draft. The entrance was in ruins. As if to camouflage the damage that a bad hit had caused, the cracks in the walls were filled neatly with moss. It made a fanciful design.

"—a land so vast and blessed with human resources and nature's gifts, it holds untold potential, were it not for the cloven hoof. The wars they fight are Hebrew wars. The taxes paid are tribute to the bankers."

The teacher cleared his throat and braced himself to release the finale:

"—the Hebrew leverage. The Jewish influence on what the populace consumes. Be it their bread, be it their news—it's all in

Hebrew hands. These brethren know precisely how to make stolen money talk, while blinded people listen, allowing their own enemies to wreak their havoc on society."

Everything about America was slovenly. Their thoughts. Their muddled ideology.

"—they swallow every bit of filth the radio pours forth—" A tell-tale sheen formed on the teacher's face. "—a land of mongrels, boys and girls, ruled by maneuvered vote. Even the Negroes demand equal rights. Some people even think they'll mingle. They will start pairing off. Why would a rich and lavish land agree to weakening its future generations? What self-respecting race would want to do that to itself? You ask yourself that question. Now, boys and girls. Repeat after me: 'Equality is a political ideal, not a scientific fact!'"

The class, in unison: "Equality is a political ideal, not a scientific fact."

Lilo seemed tense, yet strangely restrained. She sat nibbling the end of her pencil, while Erika strained hard not to miss even a small morsel of the lecture because it verified what Heidi had explained.

"Nowhere in nature do you find equality," the teacher raised his voice, unable to let go, although he seemed near fainting; his stump was paining him. "The time is ripe. The time is now. America will see the error of its ways—"

"I'll give you a hint," whispered Lilo. Her voice was full of laughter. She had a way of twitching her nostrils like a hare, and Erika felt irresistible hysterics bubbling up. It wasn't that she felt like laughing; in fact, salt tears still burned, deep in her nose, from having seen the small, charred child; she was quite overwrought.

"Guess what?" hissed Lilo, making faces. Her chin was wobbling wildly.

"Be quiet, for heaven's sakes!"

"Six letters in the middle." Her eyes were glistening with mischief. "Have I got a surprise for you! You'll never guess! Not in a thousand years!"

She was a reservoir of secrets; that was her stock in trade.

Now she had one she couldn't wait to share. She always aimed for center stage, and Erika surrendered her small will and snapped out of her wooziness. She wrote on a small piece of paper: "I'll trade you a slice of my sausage!" A pretend sausage, Lilo knew, but even so, it was the thought that counted.

"Two slices," hissed Lilo the glutton. Her appetite, gargantuan! Her stomach, always growling.

"Now, boys and girls. Once more. What is the deadliest of all sins? Come up here, Erika. Up to the front. Give us your finest speech."

She stood. Her knees felt jellyish. The deadliest of all sins? She had her share of flaws. That's why she needed her scholastic excellence, to compensate for flaws. All of her senses were careening. In theory, the deadliest sin could be one of any number of offenses, including but not limited to practicing the art of spitting. Homesickness, day and night, beyond the boundaries of reason. Indulging in vile habits, such as an impure thought. Betraying Führer, Fatherland, and future by being pessimistic.

What else? She glanced at Lilo helplessly. Lilo made frantic gestures. "The deadliest of all sins—"

She meant to say: "—is cowardice!" By admitting that much, you made headway.

She couldn't force it out.

"If one of you should fall," the crippled but bemedaled teacher prodded doggedly, "a comrade will be there to dip a flag into your blood and hoist it to the ceiling—" and Erika was rocking now, just back and forth and back and forth while Lilo's eyes grew wide.

"Now, think. Put on your thinking cap. Think hard. If it's the Führer's will—"

At that, Lilo jumped up, threw out her chest, sending all her pencils flying and shouted with conviction: "If it's the Führer's will—why, even a tooth brush will aim, shoot, and hit!"

There was a startled hush. The children turned around and looked at Lilo, grinning.

"That's where I draw the line," thought Erika, and wiped a small, forbidden tear. "I'm not like Lilo. I am me."

She yearned to be like Lilo. Her heart was beating wildly. There stood a girl who spoke her mind! There stood no apple polisher! Clearly, the Fatherland demanded of a patriot his life for the beloved cause—but would she, Lilo, do it? No.

That thought held so much tension it made the classroom crackle.

Erika felt it raise the hair in the nape of her neck. She was a moth drawn to the flame, and maybe in another hour, and yet another bombing raid, her small wings would be caught and singed and all that would be left of dreams would be a heap of ashes the wind would blow away. The crackle made her shriek. She shrieked and couldn't stop. So let this war be war! So let the cause be just! What was all that to her? Just poppycock!

She was nobody special now. But one day that would change! For in her hot, young heart there sat a special, chiseled dream that gnawed on her with fine, sharp, even teeth. And once the decadence of England was pounded straight into the earth, the cruelty of Russia smashed, the foolish notions of America finally set straight, her chance would come. It would. She shrieked and couldn't stop.

"You're overwrought, child," said the teacher. His voice turned back to normal; he knew that he had taken things too far. He spoke with a strange tenderness: "Why don't you skip the marching band today and rest up on the bench? Just take it easy, Erika. I understand. Today's your special day. I have your guardian's letter here, explaining everything. I'll put it in your folder."

He turned and pointed a stern finger.

"And Lilo! You! Your head is full of raisins. I take it that you meant your comments as a joke? You must not ever let yourself be disrespectful of our *Landsers* who sacrifice for honor, Führer, Fatherland—"

"I would not dream of being disrespectful of our *Landsers*" said Lilo softly, leaning back and growing very still in memory of her brothers. In memory of all the fallen boys she might have kissed. One day. If only they had lived.

She had a birthday coming up. The air was thick with spring.

# Chapter 124

In later years, the calendar told Erika that three long weeks somehow passed by between the day when she became a woman, as Heidi had explained, the day the long-awaited letter came, the day when she and Lilo had that talk—and when the final battle for the dying city of Berlin began. That's not how she remembers it. The years have made that memory a blur.

As she remembers it, it started on the Führer's birthday and ended when the lilacs ceased to bloom.

Why did she live when others died? Pure chance.

When Archie heckles her about the Holocaust, she asks: "What Holocaust?"

She lived her own. She walked out of her own. The Holocaust she knew was laden with the grief of many centuries. It fed on ancient timbers.

Today, she looks at Archibald with steely eyes that see the end as though it happened yesterday. She sees it still - as though a reel were running. Her face is hard. She will say this: of mercy, there was none.

Sneers Archibald, all fat thumbs, even fatter toes, all glutted

with his ego: "Well? Didn't you burn up the Jews?"

That's when her heart leaps to her tongue, for her spirit is burning and raging: "You don't know the least thing about me!"

On any other day, the two girls might have headed home as soon as classes were dismissed to give Heidi a hand with the chores. Easter weekend was approaching - as good a time as any to kneel into spring cleaning. The girls took joy in that; there was pride in completing one's duties; they didn't need Heidi to prompt them; spring cleaning fed into a holiday mood.

Not so that afternoon, however, with Lilo bursting at the seams, filled to the brim with bubbling importance, yet uncharacteristically oblique. Therefore, Erika grabbed jacket, notebooks, pencil case and scarf and shouted, running after Lilo: "Give me a clue. A tiny clue."

Lilo was taking mighty strides. "I told you. It starts with R—"

"You said J, Lilo. J."

"I changed my mind. It's R."

"Give me another clue."

"Not now."

It was spring, finally, and hope was in the air. Winter coughs were past; the air was dry and clean. Rooftops glittered in the sunshine. The acorns were sprouting their buds. The sun poured down nuggets of gold.

"This way. This way."

Lilo decided on a detour with a mysterious air, stopping only long enough to pick up Winston Churchill, who waited at the corner. She strode across the blackened rubble, heading for the railroad station where she had staked out a new cook to beam at with all her might, so he would set aside his herring heads for her, along with other useful scraps that Winston Churchill relished.

"Tell me. Tell me," begged Erika, but Lilo savored the suspense, as smug as though she had already the heel of a salami in her pocket.

"Red Cross?"

"No."

"Extra rations?"

"No."

"Radio BBC?"

"No! Why, the very thought!"

"Not the Red Army, Lilo!"

"Now stop it, silly goose! Be patient!"

Erika took a gulp of breath and asked in a voice that cracked: "Relatives?"

"Almost," said Lilo, briskly, sidestepping a gigantic pothole.

Spring floated on billows of clouds. The sky was thick with scents. New grass. Young daisies. Apple blossoms.

"You're getting warm. Here is another one. It starts with an 'L', and it ends with an 'r.'"

"Letter?"

"My, you're smart today."

So overcome was Erika, she had to sit down on the sidewalk. "For me?" She had to swallow down a frog deep in her throat before she was able to stammer: "You aren't fooling me?"

"See for yourself. I caught the *Postfrau* just in time. What did I tell you, girl?"

"I knew it! I knew it!" shrieked Erika, while Lilo danced from foot to foot and waved a crumpled envelope and Winston Churchill rushed around in circles. "They're coming! They're coming! They're coming!" It was yelps. It was shrieks near hysterics, and more.

Her hands shook as she took the letter. It had no postmark; a vital corner had been torn away. It had been rained and snowed on, but there it was, in black and white, four pages long, addressed to her in Mimi's dainty script, telling her that even though the trek was thinning out and people, one by one, sank into heaps of snow where they were left to die, her family was still alive and struggling homeward to the Fatherland.

"They're heading right this way! They're coming, Lilo! They're coming!"

Her heart was hammering as though it would explode her chest; this called for celebration; she could already smell the apfelstrudel baking in the oven. When something odd came flying, slammed hard into a wall above her head and scattered dust into her hair, she didn't even duck.

"Well, girl? What did I tell you?" Lilo smiled, and tried to calm down Winston Churchill, who was jumping and snorting and worse. "It surely looks that way."

"My God, they're almost here!" breathed Erika, transported, and Lilo offered in a burst of generosity: "I'll even let you wear my brand new Easter dress."

"You will?"

Lilo was charity itself: "Of course. Read slowly, will you? Slowly!"

It took a while for Erika to get her bearings; practically all of her spittle was gone. She could not finish what she meant to say; she felt as though she were floating on air. At long last, fortune smiled; here was the evidence!

"They're still alive! They're heading right this way! It even says the baby—"

She was so looking forward to the baby; she had a pair of knitted booties waiting, sitting on a little paper doily with neatly scalloped edges. She had the route mapped out already; she knew precisely how to lead her family triumphantly to safety while circumventing three enormous craters so the carriage wouldn't bounce so much and perhaps spill the baby!

"The'yre coming! They're coming!"

She was beside herself! Had Lilo not caught her by her sleeve and stopped her then and there, she would have raced for broom and dust pan to sweep the street free of the rakish leaflets that claimed the Führer was in direst straits, the enemy was winning - all that, and more, all poppycock!

"All that," Lilo was shouting, too, "is poppycock! What did I tell you, ha? I knew it all along! Come on, now! Hurry up!" The tide would turn; the war would be a one-front war; Americans would see the error of their ways and join the Führer finally.

"Let's go," decided Lilo. "Let's catch the last two trains!"

There was always a lull between raids, just after three o'clock and before supper, and caution should have made them look for yet another bunker while sitting out the frenzy of destruction, but venturing into the streets as soon as they were safe.

Not so that afternoon. Today was worth taking chances.

The two girls headed for the railroad station, where they waited for two hours and Lilo danced from foot to foot while holding up a sign and shouting herself hoarse: "Apanlee! Apanlee! Anybody here from Apanlee?"

The ramp on which they stood resembled a relief map of the moon—all shell holes, crusted crater tops. The crowds kept on pushing and shoving. The first of two expected trains pulled in, locomotive belching, straining, refugees hanging from the wagons like clusters on a vine.

The coaches shuddered to a halt.

"Where is my child? Where is my child?" a desperate woman cried. "I'm looking for my child. Has anybody seen my child?"

The surging crowd caught her and pushed her forward; she ruddered with her elbows to break free.

A *Landser*, standing on the platform, said to the searching mother, a glazed look on his face: "Forget it. Just forget it." He looked bloodied and bowed; a jagged tin can dangled at his belt; he was unshaven and unwashed. He wore his right arm in a sling, his left sleeve dangled empty.

The woman told him doggedly: "I'm looking for my son. He's ten years old and wearing a green jacket."

"The war is now lost," he announced. "The Führer is dead, and that's it."

She started stuttering: "He's small. He looks much younger than his age. My mother put him on a train a week ago—"

"The Russkis bayoneted him," the *Landser* said and broke into a giggle.

The waiting people backed away from him as though he were a leper, but Lilo took him by his dangling sleeve and ordered

firmly: "Come with me. I'll get you a cup of hot coffee."

He started howling then. He howled and couldn't stop. "It's over. Finished. Done! Are you all blind? Are you all mad? The eastern front is torn to shreds! We've had it, idiots! We're finished! Done! Kaputt! We've lost the Führer's war!"

"Just never mind him. Never mind him," said Lilo to the hostile crowd. "Here. Take your rucksack. Right this way. No need to look for trouble."

"The rivers," howled the cripple, "red with the blood of Germany."

"This way. Hold onto me," urged Lilo, propelling him along. He kept on spilling words as if he hadn't heard. Something had snapped inside him; it would take many months to retrieve his shattered self.

"The front gave way!" he shrieked and dug his fingers into Lilo's shoulder so that she slumped and winced. "The borders, boiling over!"

"Come on. Come on. I'll show the way. You need delousing. Badly. Once you are fumigated, you'll feel better. Just take my word for it."

"The winter killed the trek," he shouted, stiffening. "You hear me? Do you hear me?" He stopped them in the middle of the ramp and bored his blood-shot eyes straight into Erika's. "If something moved within a dune," he sobbed, "I didn't stop to check."

An hour passed. Two. Three.

The afternoon was almost gone; train after train kept spilling refugees, all travel-weary and disheveled, all pouring silently in droves into the fortress city, already full to overflowing.

Still, the two girls stood, waiting.

The people on the ramp sipped ersatz coffee. Young children sobbed and wailed. Red Cross girls lifted buckets of hot water. With grim determination, Lilo held up her sign, despite a cramping arm, while Erika sat by the curb, just rocking back and forth, her heart sinking lower and lower. The wounded came on lit-

ters, the dead in gunny sacks.

A faint and different sound nipped at the outskirts of Berlin.

Three soldiers hobbled by—one with a cane, the other two on crutches. Lilo saluted eagerly. She looked upon all soldiers reverently. She smiled at every one.

"We barely made it. Barely," they claimed while stumbling through the rubble.

"What are you hoping for?" they asked, to which there was no answer.

None of them had ever heard of Apanlee. They said: our people fell. They claimed: blood-soaked, the eastern front. The dead are dead, they said, and will not live again. The snow, they said while staring at the girls from sad, defeated eyes, was piling up on them.

"There's one more train," said Lilo finally, unwilling to temper her zeal.

The rumbling from the east increased, but Lilo set her chin. She turned to Erika, who merely shook her head. She told her in a low and stubborn voice: "I am not giving up yet. Are you?"

"There's just no point. Let's go," urged Erika, now that the rush of hope the letter had unleashed had dwindled to a tiny trickle. Her voice was thick with tears.

"Let's wait. Maybe they switched a train?" said Lilo lamely, in the end, unable to endure the look in her friend's stricken face.

"No. There's no point." It was already after five o'clock, and there was little margin left for hope; besides, the pre-dusk raid was overdue; the sirens were already warming up.

"What's another day? I bet you a penny they're coming tomorrow."

"Tomorrow's Saturday." On Saturdays the chores piled up; there was no chance to wait at the station tomorrow.

"And Sunday is out, too."

On Sundays the girls stuck to Heidi. Sundays were the worst for Heidi; for hours, she sat idly by the window, just staring at her empty hands, while the girls tiptoed and whispered around

her.

"And Monday it's our turn to queue."

"We'll wait," decided Lilo forcefully. "There's still a train scheduled to arrive. I know that for a fact. I know the cook who feeds that train; he promised me potato peels and turnips." The dog hated turnips, but turnips were better than nothing.

Far in the distance, a detonation rumbled hard. A siren picked up speed, and Erika crossed leg on leg from habit and precaution. Already her bladder was filling. Three long wails meant death was coming. The everlasting dust that followed every bombing raid made Winston Churchill sneeze nonstop; he was already sneezing.

"The raid is late," said Erika. Her nostrils stung like fire. "Let's run." She rummaged in her pocket while spilling forth two pencil stubs, some bread crumbs, and the teacher's note that praised her for her eulogies but scolded her for being cartwheel-clumsy.

"Don't be a ninny. Silly!"

She found a handkerchief with which to blow her nose. "Come on. Let's sprint. They're almost here." The Amis were reliable that way. They dropped their bombs at ten, at two, and finally at six. They came in clusters by the clock, started killing people by the clock, and by the clock they left. In yet another fifteen minutes, more would come droning in, out of the west, in numbers beyond counting, in strength beyond all words, all dropping their thudding explosives. The asphalt would start bubbling in the street.

"I have another secret still," said Lilo, tugging at her sleeve. "I'm not supposed to tell."

"Oh, Christ Almighty! Please!"

"Nobody knows. Not even Mommie knows. It starts with 'J'—"

"I've had it now! I've had it. I've had it up to here!" Erika said angrily while giving Lilo a decided push, surprising even to herself. "I'm through with games. I'm grown-up now. I will no longer—"

"—and it ends with "n," said Lilo very gently. She hugged her knees and kept her face averted.

"Please. Don't make fun of me."

"I'm not. Look—"

"Let me see that letter once again—"

"Here. Careful. Easy! Easy!"

"The date on the letter is missing. It could be a year old."

Lilo was chewing on her lip. The afternoon air became raw. "So what? It probably means nothing."

The hissing in the air increased. A sentry was rapping his boots with a stick. A loudspeaker blared marches.

"Let's hurry up! Just listen, Lilo. Listen!" The earth was rolling like a ship. There still was time to make it to the bunkers, to finish off a disappointing day, but Lilo seemed unwilling.

"We'll wait, and not another word," said Lilo, patting Erika. "I'm counting on the cook."

There was the train, still scheduled to roll in; there were still fifteen minutes' worth of wait left until all hope was gone, and she was hungry, in fact, famished; all she had had to eat last night was a gray herring head and half a slice of bread. She shivered, though it was mid-April; her stomach growled as if it were a tiger. She lifted her young chin and watched a plane pull up, climb high, and higher. A cloud of smoke came slowly out of nowhere and moved across the street, thinning and lifting languidly.

"You'd think," said Lilo suddenly, "that they'd play fair. Why can't the enemy play fair? What is it with them? Why are they bombing us? Unless we ask ourselves why they are doing this, why we are doing it, there'll be no end to it!"

An anti-aircraft gun barked sharply, several miles away, and Lilo leaned back suddenly and squinted hard against the sinking sun where something silvery plunged from a cloud formation, releasing little specks of black that kept exploding dully.

"Vulgarians!" said Lilo, vehement, not specifying whom she meant. though you could take your guess. The lash of that young tongue was amazing. "Vulgarians! Vulgarians! They don't know

the least thing about us!"

A few more explosions, much louder and closer this time—yet the sky was as clean as a bowl.

The trees began to toss. The girls looked at each other. And Lilo said again: "They don't know the least thing about us."

"We need to leave," said Erika, voice choked. "Your mother wants us home. She wants us to go queueing. Let's go."

"Are you my friend?" asked Lilo. The heavy rumble of artillery kept wafting over the horizon. A sudden echo rolled, diminishing.

"Of course. Why do you even ask?"

"All right, then. Listen. Let's have a silly talk. Just never mind the bombs."

"Now they're bombing out of turn," shrieked Erika, demented. "Why can't they, at the very least, respect the rules of war?"

"They have no possible excuse," said Lilo evenly. "It's so oppressive! God! If they think they can scare me, my name is Oppenpopp. They and their chocolate soldiers!"

She sat down at the edge of a small bomb crater, still holding Winston Churchill firmly on the leash. She stroked his nose with a delicate finger. "The mutt is nervous, God knows why. Look at his fur. Here's what I want to know. Why do they want to kill me? What have I done to them? I never bothered them."

Something odd, shadowy, came slowly floating by, which might have been a cinder. No more than fifteen feet away, it rained a few roof tiles and, oddly, timid wisps of smoke curled suddenly from a dilapidated roof, but the sky was not yet spitting fire.

"Let's go!" begged Erika, now trembling head to toe, but Lilo kept on talking. When she was in that mood, you couldn't get a word in edgewise.

"Here's what I think. It must be said. They look like us. We look like them. I'm sure we could be friends. I meant to ask the teacher. Why, in God's good name, America? I'd like to understand their point of view. I'm dying for the nitty-gritty. Right now, it's all a mystery to me. I bet you they make fun of us. As we make fun of them. I bet you they think they are right. I bet

you they think we are wrong. I bet you they think this war makes them heroes. Can you imagine that?"

"I bet you anything," said Erika, now quite beside herself, and started tugging hard at Lilo, "if we don't leave right now and find ourselves a bunker—" but Lilo suddenly smacked Winston Churchill hard. Now she was twice as angry.

"We're lucky. At least we're informed. We know whose war we're fighting. I wonder whose war they are fighting—"

"Lilo—"

"You're smart. The smartest one in class. You figure it all out. See that dilapidated tower over there?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"What about it? Well, guess what? That anti-aircraft tower? Behind that row of houses?"

All this was just too much for Erika. It was full overload. Her panties were already getting damp.

"Please, Lilo! Lilo!"

Why pin her timid question mark of bravery against the vast horizon that now was roaring like a lion to advertise another raid? The dog lay quivering already, his tail flush with the ground. His skin was shuddering; his hair was bristling on end; while Erika kept crossing leg on leg to forestall the explosion of her bladder.

"Those aren't bombs," said Lilo. "This time, they're shelling us."

She was still stroking Winston Churchill, just stroking him and stroking him. Her eyes had the texture of glaciers. She looked up, then, and took it in—all of it, everything! In one big gulp! The sky! Vast! Virginal! And something soft and gentle and infinitely beautiful came with a ray of sun and splintered in her face.

"See? After all, " said Lilo softly, now speaking only to herself, "we can't be wrong. That is impossible!" Above, the tree tops stirred. A tear fell smack on the torn and crumpled letter and blotched a few more words. And Lilo said with quiet simplicity:

"Look at that plane up there. Is he a fool, or what? I bet you

he is just like us. I bet you we are just like him. No better, and no worse."

The earth shook with a nearby detonation. Lilo's eyes were two puddles of blue. She wiped a film of ashes from her face and added: "You want to know my secret?"

"Not really. No," said Erika, drawing air in through a very wet nose.

"I'll tell you anyway."

"I've had it now," said Erika. "I've had it up to here." With nothing left but broken hope, she had her hands full with herself. She did not want to know. What did she have to counteract another bombing raid? Her lifted chin, that's all. It was so little that she wanted. Just order. Sanity. Fair play. A full night's sleep, perhaps, and just a fragment of a dream to help her through another weekend, now that all hope was gone.

"Look. Here they come!"

Yes, there they were, all in formation, orderly, all flying death as orderly as geese. As if on smooth conveyor belts they came—the Flying Fortresses, the US Air Armada.

And what they brought came from the teeth of hell.

"You know who's up there? On that roof?" said Lilo barely audible and put both arms around her pet. "It's Jonathan. I saw him. Yesterday. I climbed across the roof and paid him a quick visit. He's up there. By himself. All by himself. With just one rusty ack-ack gun. With hardly any shells—"

# Chapter 125

Ack-ack. Ack-ack-ack-ack-ack-ack!

And in response: Ack-ack! Ack-ack!

She ran for her life, through a nightmare, hugging the walls as she ran. She dove for roadside ditches and scrambled out again. A child, a living torch, ran shrieking in the opposite direction. She glimpsed that from the corner of her eye. Untold civilian dead littered the sidewalk. Out of some atavistic knowledge, she recognized the voice.

She understood it even then: this was the Antichrist!

The Antichrist was doing this, and he had dragon's teeth. He crunched on living bone. He shredded everything. He vomited up earth and ashes that flowered in the trembling sky in huge, ballooning mushrooms. He melted baby prams; he flattened wheelbarrows; he chewed up human flesh with quiet and murderous efficiency. A child was shredded right across the street from where she stood, dazed from the noise and flashes.

The Beast! The Beast!

She couldn't see; she couldn't breathe; she thought that she

would suffocate. Above her, something flew apart in flames and plummeted down toward her in a brilliant ball of fire. Someone shouted frantic orders. Someone else was shouting for a vanished company. The streets were filled with smoke. Shrapnel shot through the air. Thick clumps of wet soil followed, nobody knew from where.

Ack-ack. Ack-ack-ack-ack-ack-ack!

Walls shattered everywhere. A church steeple collapsed. A large building broke in half as though it were a suitcase being opened, and out fell furniture, a baby crib, the infant still inside, clutching at its intestines as they were spilling out. Its flesh hung in tatters from its body.

She saw in passing, as she ran, that a small group of prisoners, discarding picks and shovels, had broken free and was looting a stalled train—grotesque, bizarre and definitely treasonous!—but then they, too, threw everything and ran. Huge flames were licking everywhere. Thick columns of smoke rose from a dozen different streets. Two transport trucks had taken hits; oily smoke kept pouring out of them. The trees started groaning and swaying. A mushroom of soot ballooned up. Another roof sagged slowly and collapsed. A bridge exploded in the distance. A huge shell crashed into a wall.

She pressed herself against the shuddering building, and when she thought she could, she peeked through trembling fingers.

There was the train!

Its roar drowned out the feeble sound of a lone ack-ack gun, against the roaring of the Antichrist, atop the anti-aircraft tower. She saw that Lilo crouched behind a wall surveying her surroundings, still clutching Winston Churchill by the collar.

Another blast, much closer. It blew a truck aside as if it were a toy.

Ack-ack. Ack-ack-ack-ack-ack-ack!

Somebody was still shooting from the rooftop; that might be Jonathan. By then, the street was burning on both ends, and every time the sirens wailed, she jumped again and ran, right through the screaming sirens, shrieking.

Another roof blew off. A second. And a third.

The rubble flew in all directions. Three terrifying booms, one following another, made iron rush and bite into convulsing flesh and started setting stone on fire and chewing up the pipes as if with living teeth, and it was nails dug into earth to hold herself down somehow.

The clouds were bathed, end to end, in reddish hues. A sharp flame shot up, hissing, and Winston Churchill tore away from Lilo, yelped once, did a decided somersault and fell onto the pavement with a thud.

The earth convulsed and shook. The mutt was crawling on his belly, a gash along his back the width of a hand. By then, it was almost pitch black; the smoke was that thick, growing thicker. A piece of burning wood sailed by. The asphalt started bubbling.

Another detonation lifted Winston Churchill and threw him down on the asphalt. Lilo crawled forward on blistering knees to try to reach her mutt. And then a siren howled once—sharply. And gave out in mid-shriek.

Then came a roar. There was a flash—so light that it seemed dark, so loud it caused a silence.

Lilo lay motionless on top of Winston Churchill. Her hardened nails still clutched at Winston Churchill's ears. Pure Lilo, that. She stared at Erika, still mocking, brave, with that half-smile, defying war, defying fate, defying fear as though to say: "They don't know the least thing about me."

She had the staring game down pat. She had that half-smile pat. She stared and didn't blink.

And that's when Erika saw clearly: eternity stared back.

In later years, she couldn't say how long the nightmare lasted.

It was a holocaust, and she was all alone! The city lay in flames. Steel plowed the earth; flames set the clouds of spring afire; a wall collapsed in front of her, while she reeled backwards, dizzy, colliding with a Hitler Youth who shouted for his mother. Something still dove at her with shrieking engines, death spewing from its wings. She barely heard the aircraft,

such was the roar of fire, such was the shriek of nerve ends, all aflame.

She leap-frogged from sidewalk to sidewalk. Her mind was careening with panic.

"*Stoi*!" someone yelled in Russian. "*Stoi!* Stop!"

She saw that the clouds drifting upwards were ashes, obscuring her vision, lit from below. The street was as littered as a battlefield; bodies lay strewn about like swatted flies. Huge Soveit tanks rolled over them and flattened them. Shells screamed, then slammed into the brick and stone on both sides of the alley.

She cowered from the fiendish violence which poured in from the east in hideous, slit-eyed clusters. She heard the whistle of the shells and bits of shrapnel flying by but paid no heed; there was no time; grenades zipped by in volleys. Around her, it was raining leaves and little twigs; the very clouds kept raining fire. A torn-off wheel sailed by and rolled across the street. The shrapnel tore into the earth and penetrated the walls of homes that still stood, trembling, quaking.

Ack-ack. Ack-ack!

She saw that, in some side streets, small pockets of determined Hitler Youth were fighting still, battling on with hard ferocity. Lone snipers were firing wildly from surrounding buildings, and one of them, no doubt, was Jonathan. She heard the sound; the feeble ack-ack gun; it rattled from the rooftop where Jonathan was hiding.

She tried to make it up there. Hot air whipped over her. She tasted acrid smoke. A bombed-out panzer blocked her way; behind it were mountains of rubble. Geysers of dust subsided; new ones rose in their place. A doorframe was torn away; timber and earth flew sky-high.

Ack-ack. Ack-ack! Ack-ack. Ack-ack!

Death drummed from every roof. A piece of shrapnel grazed her shoulder; she didn't even notice she was bleeding. She felt her arm but did not feel the pain. She climbed across the wreckage. The dust flakes fell like snow.

The Beast! The Beast! The Antichrist!

He dug out eyes. He severed ears and chins and genitals. He plummeted out of the sky in showers of black beans. He riddled the buildings with bullets. He broke telephone poles in half as though they were but toothpicks. He took barbed wire with both hands and wrapped it around living flesh. He flattened bunkers with his tanks, then burrowed into trenches and heaved up out of their recesses, with flesh and hair stuck to his treads. He set an ambulance aflame. He made the Führer's city, end to end, a giant furnace, roaring.

He blew his breath into the German holocaust. His colors shone and hooted through cavities where window panes had been. He poured brimstone on the city of Berlin. He robbed the sun of its luster. He left the fallen youth of Germany unburied in the ditches.

Aryans fell, everywhere. They sank down as though grass from a blade.

There was one building that still stood, and that was Heidi's house. She knew that it was Heidi's house; she could tell by the fire-charred mail box. A direct hit had split it, end to end, but both ends still held up.

She struggled to crawl through the window to reach the bunker basement through the entrance, but there were mountains of debris; she couldn't crawl across it. She lost a shoe, there was no time to fish for it. She heard somebody whimper: "Heidi! Heidi!" and realized it was her voice, her pygmy voice, her coward's voice that Lilo used to taunt.

She stopped that soon enough!

A body lay across the steps, as blackened as a ham forgotten in a chimney. It wore a dress with polka dots; she could tell that by some shreds of sleeve. Her mind careening like a wheel, she just leaped over it.

There was a narrow hallway, and flattening herself against the wall, she noticed something jumping crazily inside her brain, and somewhere, in the havoc and confusion, she realized it was a

memory, a passage from Marleen's old Bible. She sensed it in her sinews that this was reaping time. This was the Antichrist against her Aryan race, making his powers known.

"Hitler kaputt! Hitler kaputt!" the Antichrist howled in the streets of Germany.

His tools were the hammer and sickle, his insignia the pentagram, appointed by eternity before the world began. Out of the overflow of his foul mouth the Antichrist spewed rage, and all creation trembled at his coming. This was Apocalypse. This was because the Führer, verily, dared to redraw the boundaries of nations so that the stalwart people would not be scattered to the winds.

That's what this struggle meant. That's what the Bible said. That's why the hammer of the Antichrist kept smashing everything, and where it hit, another building flew apart as though it were a watermelon. That's why the sickle kept on swishing forcefully, and where it hit, blond, blue-eyed people fell—and for no other reason, verily, than that they had gathered, as young falcons might, to be steeled, to rejoice in their wings.

She ran through the rubble, a weasel, her ear cocked for the sound of guns, while one roof took the torch from yet another. She took leap after leap, sprinting on, the breath of the Beast on her nape as it tore into fallen bodies, tossing limbs and torsos everywhere—into the air, into the trees, across the street, into the burning flames.

As she stood, shivering, amid the rubble and the soot, bombs and shells kept rushing down and biting deep into groaning walls. When she saw the ashcan the psychic spoke about, it was not even a surprise.

She took a mighty leap.

With her last strength, she closed the lid and crouched inside. That's how she, Erika survived. Let Archibald not heckle her about the Holocaust with gravy dripping from his chin!

"We fought," she says today in Archie's living room, where

both sit on the fraying couch that Little Melly, many years ago, took pains to dress up with her doilies. The doilies are still there.

"You fought?" sneers Archibald.

"We did. You would have, too. We were embroiled in war. We clung to life against all odds. Recorded history is full of gaping holes. By adding falsehood and discarding truth—"

He will not let her finish. He decides to give her a piece of his mind. He doesn't tolerate these neo-Nazi pranksters, not in his living room. "Sure. Sure. Deny it all you want. Deny six million Jews."

Now that he, too, is into politics, along with tele-gospeling, he works the Holocaust into most anything. It always works. It keeps the greenbacks coming. He uses it to keep on socking it to Satan, his prayer book in hand, soul-saving electronically, his only worry now the Unitarians, still giving him a headache. He relishes rattling their teeth.

Says Archibald, and bites into his apfelstrudel, while all the cousins sit there, just studying their hands:

"You could've spoken up. You had no business killing Jews. That's my opinion. Period. Say, Temperance? Give me another munchie."

There sits a man with a well-rounded ego, awash with his pot-bellied pride, sworn to destroy the Antichrist as Christ's ambassador. She says quietly: "You don't know the least thing about me."

But Archie thinks he does. In fact, he knows he does. As far as Archie knows, the good Lord is in charge, and Archie is His coach. His prayers, all of them, have been successful; his country's soldiers laid to ashes, one by one, the sparkle of the Führer's cities, and that, for Archibald, is evidence enough.

But Erika is Erika and never willing to leave well enough alone. "Do me a favor, well you? Have you lived through a Holocaust? I know about my Holocaust. Just take your Holocaust out of my face. That is my one request."

She never knew just how the pieces fit until it came to her

artistically. Even after she became a writer to the marrow of her bones, she could not translate even to herself just what it meant to have been there, alone, just barely thirteen years of age, a speck of life an inch away from being blown to smithereens, abandoned to the broiling night that marked the Beast's advance.

That's what she owes to Jonathan. That was the quiet legacy he gave to her atop his dying city.

He said to her, atop the roof—below, the dying city: "I count on you. Don't touch up anything." Those words made out of her an artist, consummate. He plunged them deep into her soul, where they turned into searchlights. That's what she took away—the mission to tell all.

If there were words, then she would find the words. If there were absolutes, then she would find the absolutes.

But Archie doesn't want to hear what came at her, at age thirteen, the day when innocence was stripped from her like skin from off a snake as she ran slipping on the blood of Hitler Youth collecting in small puddles in the gutter.

It was a cataract, an avalanche of death and fire, and she a puppy in a monster's teeth. A tank loomed right in front of her; she saw its hulk and tried to dodge it, but that was difficult; huge balls of smoke ballooned around her; the asphalt started bubbling everywhere, and shrapnel raced close by her legs and bit into the earth.

There was no air to breathe, the fire sucked it from her lips.

Somebody yelled in Russian: "*Stoi! Stoi!*" And then she heard: "*Frau! Komm!*"

He was her first. He would not be her last.

He was a furry Red. He wore a bayoneted rifle on his shoulders, a smirk of silly satisfaction on his face, and a geranium—the kind that Heidi grew to heal her broken spirit—stuck loosely in his buttonhole. She saw him sitting, sprawling on the butcher's steps—the butcher had been hanged, right in his display window, amid his ersatz sausages, a sign around his neck.

She stood stockstill. He had not seen her yet.

He sat there, slovenly and grinning, admiring an array of stolen watches. He had strapped three of them around his wrist, and when he raised his eyes and blinked against the smoke, there stood a Hitler girl in her trim uniform with frozen face and mended socks who had not spied him soon enough.

He grunted once. A huge and hairy leg, clad in a muddy boot, stretched out into her path, and she tripped over it. She crashed down on the pavement. He stood, spread-eagled, over her, his pinpoint stare on her. His eyes were glistening with lust, and what he wanted now was not just someone's watch or someone's silverware or someone's agony or even someone's life.

He wanted purity. He wanted innocence.

The scratchy broadcast had told what he wanted. Three times a day, for months on end, it hectored the Red Army to loot and rape and kill. Three times a day, he heard the voice of Ilya Ehrenburg, the Jewish propagandist, inflaming the Red Army, his spurs in young men's flanks. And what the broadcast said was this:

"Rape! All you want. That is the only way to break the Aryan spirit."

He ordered her, as many would, in days to come: "*Frau. Komm. Frau. Komm.*"

The trees began to sway. He held her down, pinning her left wrist with a hard heel and started fumbling with his trousers.

She sank her teeth in his repulsive flesh and locked her jaws on it.

He swore. With one swift, brutal motion, he took his bayonet, thrust it downward, and pinned her by her Hitler skirt. He rammed a fleshy knee into her chest and gurgled in her ear. "Hitler kaputt? Hitler kaputt?"

She gagged and sobbed and spit. She bit and scratched and kicked.

He wrestled her onto her back. He smelled of sour rags and onions.

Ack-ack-ack-ack!

The earth burned, end to end; the sky flamed wildly; shells kept on bursting everywhere. She still held on. She had strong teeth; no wonder: Heidi made her brush them every morning with salt to strengthen them.

The buttons flew. The brooch with the ear stalk sailed into the gutter.

He had huge scars and pockmarks on his cheeks. He bent in a half-curve on top of her, still fumbling with his trouser belt, and that's when something dropped from her, and that, amazingly, was cowardice.

She stood outside herself. She saw the scene as though it were a movie. That gave her a hot surge of strength. It was an agile thing, this brand-new self, this silver speck that danced within the clouds and fell into a dive, unleashing glowing metal, dot by dot, still smashing lead into the dying, smoking city before it pulled out of its plunge in a precise and elegant loop.

She also heard, detached, with her left ear, the ack-ack fire coming from the roof, dispatched by Jonathan. She knew that it was Jonathan! He was up there, somewhere, behind a chimney stack, and he was shooting, shooting, shooting. He kept firing as though into the waves of an ocean.

The enemy on top of her gave a decided grunt. He cursed and, in surprise, let go.

That's when she started leaping. She leaped as a grasshopper leaped, to escape the beak of a stork.

He followed; he was still behind her. She had long legs, but his were longer, stronger. She collided with someone; she thought her lungs would explode. Showers of sparks fell onto the rubble, starting small, smoking flames that would grow into roaring infernos.

The bombs were still falling and exploding, and every time one hit, a shudder ran through the earth. Smoke was everywhere, rubble everywhere; the air raid was still in full swing. "*Stoi!*" yelled the enemy, but now her ears were deaf. The bombs had deafened them.

"Hitler kaputt!" yelled the leviathan, this time right on her

neck.

She was past fear, past grief, past rage. It was survival now—survival of the kind that made grown people bare their teeth and snarl at little children. She, too. She snarled at every obstacle. She heard the popping sounds of shells exploding and knew that he was still behind her.

"Germans kaputt!" he howled, but now she shouted back: "You don't know the least thing about me!"

A tank came at her, headlights blazing, with difficulty barreling across the corner, then disappearing in the smoke. It was festooned from end to end, with slit-eyed troopers, monsters—all monsters from another world, who pointed at her, howling, while every rocket of the Antichrist was shrieking now with victory. Walls kept on cracking everywhere and dust and plaster whirled.

"Ack-ack-ack-ack!"

Still, Jonathan!

A solid bank of smoke came at her from her left, all black and fat and greasy, and through it whipped lashes of lightning. A panzer somersaulted, then rolled on its back, a fallen dinosaur. Somewhere, somebody laughed—a human mind gone crazy. Somebody else was yelling savagely in Russian: "Hitler kaputt? Germans kaputt? *Stoi!* Stop!"

She knew he was still behind her. She had been trained to sprint. She sprinted for her life, as Lilo would have sprinted, had Lilo still been here, instead of lying in those ruins, somewhere, staring. Across the street, a Red Cross nurse ran, too, clutching a frying pan. Her chin blew off. The pan careened across the street. She didn't stop. She ran. She tried to reach the other side but shrapnel cleaved her head.

"*Stoi*! I said *stoi*!"

She gulped and dashed forward as bullets ricocheted from the dilapidated, blackened walls. The firestorm kept spewing smoke and ashes. Huge clouds gave birth to yet more clouds, all greasy. Black. Foreboding.

She tripped. She fell. Above her knelt her Antichrist. Ver-

min nested in his hair. She saw that he had maggots in his eyes.

It was her youth and strength and will to live against the fire in his loins, the iron in his fists. She managed to break loose once more; she tried to vault inside a stalled furniture van. He reached inside and grabbed her by one ankle. She felt it snapping like a twig. She gasped with shock, but felt no pain. Just fury.

He seized her by her braids. A hard fist landed in her face. It brought her to her knees.

"*Frau, komm!*" he howled. "*Frau, komm!*" he gurgled in her ear. "*Frau, komm. Frau, komm. Frau, komm!*"

And that is how she learned at last what grown men did to women.

Then it was five. Ten. Dozens. They came at her, and they encircled her. It was a rolling avalanche of lust. No roadblocks would have stopped them. They came at her atop their tanks, the treads of which were smeared with blood. They boiled out of side alleys. The cellars kept on vomiting them up. They dropped from trees. They poured through the Brandenburg Gate in lava-like waves of destruction. They climbed over the roofs and tumbled from the vehicles, and they surrounded her.

They fell on her in scores, like locusts.

They grabbed her by the neck, and then they bore down hard and left her lying in the gutter amid the smell of blood and lust before another wave arrived to force her legs apart. Still more appeared from behind hedges, all crowding her, all waiting for their turn. Their weight toppled over the fence. They all rolled over her, guns in their hands, guns that had bayonets attached, pinning her down to the earth by her clean Hitler skirt.

She was one Aryan girl who never had a chance. It's history that men who stank of garlic, lice crawling on their collars, took brutal turns with her. A polar darkness settled in her soul that day, and it would never leave. Her heart froze then and there, and it would never thaw.

She lay, supine, and saw the plane, still dancing in the clouds, a speck of silver. Beautiful. It seemed just like a prehistoric bird, an iron bird, still roaring, rolling, raining fire, then pulling up again. She focused her mind on that small flash of silver and shut out the rest of the world.

No longer did the Führer have to tell her: "Let me remind you of your duty." Now all was clear to her. At last she understood why her young body had been so mercilessly pounded to toughness and resilience by weeks of training in the woods.

She had been trained to iron for good cause; she had been wrong to have resisted; yes, all along, the Führer, Lilo's Führer, Heidi's Führer, had been right! If she had learned to use a gun instead of wasting time with foolish dreaming, she would not be defenseless now. If she had learned to aim and shoot, she might have picked a gun up from the gutter, she might have had a chance to finish off the Antichrist, the Evil Incarnate, the ghoul that had engaged America the Wonderland to finance dirty wars.

But all she had was empty hands with broken fingernails. That's why she belly-flopped in Heidi's tulip patch, the Antichrist on top of her to have his way with her.

There would be many, in the days that followed, who spoke the fateful words she had no choice but to accommodate—but once, right at the start that marked the end, there was a small reprieve.

And that was thanks to Jonathan.

His bullet flew, just in the nick of time. It shrieked and whistled by her ears and hit the grunting animal on her in the temple.

He jumped as though he'd been lassoed. His cap, with the Red Star, sailed, bloodied, into the bushes, and he pitched forward, jackknifed, then did a funny somersault and rolled onto his back.

A fallen boar. Still grunting. She gave him one good shove. She raised her face to scout the surroundings. The ditch was clear. She swallowed hard and ran.

She called out: "Jonathan! I'm coming, Jonathan!" She had

been blind before, but now she saw. She saw. Debris sailed by her ears. Shells were still falling everywhere. The silver speck up in the clouds kept dropping bombs as though they were black beans.

She knew that she would not surrender—no! no! and no and no and no!—not to the Beast, the Antichrist, not to the skies now black with death, not to the solid sheet of fire that came at her, and certainly not to that one peculiar, predatory bird that kept on diving for her thirteen-year-old life in small, sharp silver flashes.

She found a narrow flight of stairs. Still on her hands and knees, she started creeping upwards, her senses fanned like radar.

Smoke obscured everything. She felt her way along the wall. Through a blown-out window, by the window's dim light, she spotted Jonathan, his ashen face against the wall, for he was wounded, badly.

"I'm here," she said. "It's me."

He whispered. "Quick. Crawl over."

She saw that he was wounded in the shoulder; shrapnel had ripped away both epaulet and flesh. His face was no longer his own, but his voice was the voice she had loved.

She told him then and there: "I'll help you, Jonathan."

He kept his gun trained past her belly to cover the entrance beyond. He spoke in a hoarse whisper: "I took a hit. I can't move. My little comrade. Quick."

He pointed to the ack-ack gun. She pushed herself behind it. It had a well-oiled hinge. She acted as though she had studied the script. She steadied her hand and aimed with precision. She swung the ack-ack gun around, aimed carefully, and pulled the trigger. Now it was tit for tat. Now it was pay-back time.

She fought for Lilo. Heidi. Jonathan. She fought for Apanlee and those who'd lived and died at Apanlee—a memory much like a rosebush, now heavy with dead roses.

She aimed at the silvery speck. The gun barked. Hoarse. Staccato. Ack. Ack-ack-ack-ack-ack!

The speck stopped in mid-air. It jolted once, then shuddered briefly, starting now to flutter, fall, and something hot and stinging, yet sweet beyond all words, shot up into her nose.

She said: "It's either you or me. You don't know the least thing about me."

She saw that the pilot tried to pull up, out of the plunge, but fell into a steep, then steeper dive, trailing a gigantic tail of smoke. She melted with the anti-aircraft gun. It jolted twice again. The plane exploded in a fiery ball. And that felt good. Sweet. Right. She pulled the hammer stealthily—and as she did, the Devil danced the hora.

# Epilogue

The year is 1989. It's been two hundred years since our Russian-German ancestors first pioneered the steppe, five decades since the war began that Erika experienced as a child. The sky is smooth. A few white clouds slide by; next to me sits a wooden stranger; below sprawls Wichita; and not an hour's drive from Wichita lies Mennotown, where I am heading now. I nibble on a cracker like a squirrel. In Malibu, near Hollywood, that's where you find the thinnest people in the world.

I think: "In yet another hour, I will be hiding all my thoughts."

No matter how much time goes by, it happens every time. To face my relatives takes effort. No matter what my upper hand, I still seek their esteem.

I tell myself: "I am not Tasha. I'm Erika. Why can't I say: 'I'm Erika'?"

For many years, my relatives and I lived on two different planets, between us, lumbering with righteous wrath, their Elder, Archibald. One day I wrote to them. I even sent a picture.

"A movie star! Almost!" cried Josephine, an unrepentant flicker buff, still awed by Hollywood.

A movie star? Not quite. To tell the truth, not even close to where I really live. Nobody knows. At times, not even I am sure. Bygones are buried deep.

Now there is *Left and Right.* It changed the Midwest landscape. When *Left and Right* hit all the screens, my good friend Josie, had she been still alive, would have rushed down to see it, and afterwards she would have surely said: "Oh, I cried, I cried. It was lovely."

I am so proud of Mennotown that I can hardly stand it, although it isn't often that I admit to that. Their stars keep on sparkling like jewels. Every carrot is grown and consumed on the spot. My folks rise early and plow deep. They will not willingly condone somebody else's failure. They are like that—their feet deep in their furrows. They know the earth must breathe.

And yet, too often they will let their enemies choose their own enemies for them. Their sense of history is like an unkempt garden.

When I saw Josie last, she was as frail and delicate as a November leaf, one of the oldest citizens of Kansas. But that did not stop her; she still watched every flick—when she was young, she said, they used to call them flickers—with the power to trigger her tears. Through thick and thin this woman stayed herself, which wasn't always easy.

Whenever I would visit—as I would often do in later years when time had mellowed strife—she was in seventh heaven. She would move her old wicker chair into the sunshine on the porch where Lizzy's red geraniums still grew, and settle in with many wrinkled smiles: "Now tell me everything. I want to know the smallest morsel. All of it. All! Precisely." She energized herself by learning details of the world I have created for myself—a world she ached to know but never had the chance to see, for the Depression nullified such plans. *Left and Right* is my tribute to Josie. To her world. To her dreams. To her clan.

To the earth that grew Josie and Jan.

To the kernels that conquered the prairie. To the kernels that

brought down The Wall.

One evening, as we were sitting on the porch, just she and I and in the sky a misty moon, she told me that, once Jan was dead, she was all set to go, leave Mennotown behind, take nothing else but Rarey.

She told me of the auction going forward, only in reverse; she told me all about the time the bankers came and took Jan's farm equipment, took off with combine after combine, and even repossessed the brand new harvesters that Jan had planned to ship to Apanlee but somehow never did—and how his good friend, Doctorjay, the lush, the Lutheran, a man few dared to cross, decided in the end he'd had it with the bankers and ran them off Jan's property.

All that.

That was before the government succeeded finally in confiscating every gun to safeguard, as they say, democracy, which happened just last year.

Here's what I think, but only to myself: in those days, deep in the Depression, it was acceptable to call a thief a thief. Not now. Now we have laws called Hate Laws. They silence everyone.

There, on the porch that Jan built many years ago for his young, sparkling Josie, this matriarch and I had many cozy chats. On the wall on a bent, rusty nail hung her old, wilted suffragette hat. By then, time had so worn her spine that she could barely straighten it, but early, every morning, she took her walk against the wind.

She was like that. She said she would walk, and she did.

Josie liked to squander all her charms and energies on foreigners. She was known to be partial to them. She either liked people or didn't—and it was clear when we first met that she liked me. A lot. If ever there was such a thing in my turbulent life, she gave me a sense of belonging.

The moment I arrived in Mennotown out of the European

war, she rose and stood behind my chair. When no one knew quite what to do with me, she knew; she made me popcorn and hot chocolate milk with marshmallows on top. She even made me eat *vareniki* which she herself disliked.

She told me with a wink I thought odd at the time: "Eat. Eat. You can't shame me by eating so little. They are good for your teeth and your gums."

"Have yet another zwieback," Josie said, warm hands on both my shoulders. She took a shine to me. She spent herself on other people, gladly, but only those she liked.

She was so old, by then, nobody knew for sure just what her age might be. But she was ancient; that we knew. She did not keep that secret.

"I've lied so long about my age I really can't remember," said Josie, being Josie. "Can I afford to die? I have this bet with Archie I will outlive him yet."

For years, she told me many times, when I myself locked horns with Archie, she'd cross the street when she saw Archibald. He never managed to catch up with her, no matter how much energy and cunning he put to the pursuit.

When I saw Josie last, the paper claimed she was two years away from being mentioned coast-to-coast by Willard Scott of NBC as one of Kansas' most esteemed, noteworthy centenarians. I have been told she died in peace, which may be her last laugh.

We spent many evenings together, examining the past. Those nights were rich. She gave me her entire life to help my script along. She never told one story when two or three would do. The winds took up the sweetness of the soil and spread it everywhere—the smell of the earth, freshly plowed.

"I was a child," she said. "Jan was a grown-up suitor."

I see Jan Neufeld clearly. That's where he came alive, the man who founded Mennotown, who spread the first grain on the floor and beat out the heads with jointed flails. Josie told me many stories of the angular young man who put his seed into his

land and sons and daughters in her womb to make the future grow, who drove his sturdy roots into the soil of Mennotown so that America could prosper in the Lord.

And may He rest Jan's bones.

Old Josie told me that, when she arrived from the Ukraine—a child herself, about my age when I arrived out of the rubble of Berlin almost six decades later—she took off her shoes and walked barefoot, so she could feel the warmth of Kansas against the white and frozen wasteland she had left behind.

"And ever since," said Josie, smiling wistfully, "I walked through my life with sand in my shoes. In this town, you behave."

Right. You behave.

There is a script, and you conduct yourself according to that script. If you know what is good for you, you pay attention, verily.

I didn't, in my younger years. I was a hothead then. I would not let them be; there was a lot of friction. But there were also rules, and now I know there would not have been Mennotown, had there not been strict rules.

From Josephine, as she was called reproachfully in her own youth when she broke yet another rule, I learned the details of the early pioneering years—the prairie storms, the buffalo chips, the days when the *Wichita Eagle* was only eight pages and people paid with eggs, as fine a currency as any.

"The year when Jan and I were married," said Josephine, "a haircut cost three pennies. A loaf of bread went from a nickel to a dime."

She came to Kansas as an immigrant at a time when all travel was still done by surrey. She still remembered clearly when beards went out of fashion but mustaches hung on. She told me of the oxen taking people visiting across the bumpy road to Hillsboro, which was before the flivvers came that calcified the prairie's arteries and forced the yields and stops.

I know all about Jan and his turn-of-the-century flivver. And

Little Melly's doilies. And her shenanigans. And how Jan, still engaged to Little Melly, was set to marry her but ended up marrying Josie—who then disgraced herself by having one of the unsettling Finkelsteins arrive and have her likeness drawn, proud as she was of her first child, still snug in her young belly.

The earth moved through the tail of Halley's Comet the year when Josie wore a flowered hat—a scandalous offense. She was the first who rode a bicycle along the dusty streets of Mennotown and showed a rakish ankle. The first, but not the last.

I know the stories about Doctorjay who always smelled of iodine, and his wife, Noralee, who hid behind the apple tree so she could better eavesdrop, and how, once Noralee had passed away, he married Abigail who was a Donoghue and danced atop his nose.

"You went to him with all your woes," said Josephine, "and he knew everything, despite a third grade education. He was a riot, people said. Politically astute."

I know. He voted Roosevelt.

"He had his instincts in his bones," insisted Josephine as she and I sat on the porch and watched the shadows lengthen. "When finally the war was done and Hitler put a bullet to his brain, old Doctorjay, the town's most patriotic motorist, made his horn shriek before he took the intersection, and that's when he ran into one of Lizzy's cows. Smack! Plunk! That's how he killed himself. And wholly within character."

I listened, and I did not say a word, and in good time Old Josie died, and much was left unsaid.

Two years before she passed away, Josie took my hand and led me to the mothball-smell Historical Museum, built on the corner lot where the two country roads converge—one out of Hillsboro, one out of Wichita—replete with holes and ruts that always made Jan's horse rear up and buck as he came courting Josephine.

"Against his mother's wishes. She never would have told you so, but we all knew: she was against our marriage."

I know that story, too, for Lizzy's spirit never left; it lives on in a hundred quilts she stitched to give away to charity; it lives in jams cooked to perfection and in *vareniki* that are prepared just so.

"She was all set to have Jan marry Little Melly who wanted him in the worst way," triumphed Old Josephine. And something fired from within. Still. After all these years.

And then, with a small sigh: "Well, life is short. What can you say? Then Little Melly passed on, too. She has been dead for years. God rest her spiteful soul."

She took my hand and showed me Doctorjay's museum, where people long since dead spoke to me many times from dusty documents and rusty tools, their voices quietly intense, embedded in the fabric of this place called Mennotown, so I can tell the younger generation that there are, after all, true absolutes.

That black is black and white is white and that there is no argument.

That thrift is preferable to sloth. That it is better to be diligent than lazy and better to be clean than foul.

Here is a town still stuck in time—old-fashioned people still doing their old-fashioned living behind their checkered gingham drapes, still basking in the joys of patriotic holidays, still rolling out their hospitality, yet sensing dimly that a fiendish and nefarious thing is gnawing at the edges of their heritage with sharp and even teeth.

In *Left and Right,* I said out loud what others were merely thinking. That's why, when it premiered, it packed the movie houses, and even Archie cheered.

Now I put up with Archie, and he puts up with me. We found a truce of sorts. He says I cast spells over people. He claims I have what he calls artistry—one step removed from vanity, which is the sin of sins.

Artistry. That is my job. That is also my passion. I try to write with light, although in Hollywood, belching its moral soot, that isn't always easy.

In Mennotown, by contrast and comparison, there is a place for everything, and everything is order. That is the righteous way. Folkways still have a place in Mennotown, and black is never white.

When I was young and foolish, I was determined not to let that ruin my life—their narrow, well-scrubbed habits, as tidy as tidy can be, the lapse into Low German, the tormenting snippets of gossip. Impatient as I was in those young years for Hollywood, not knowing then from where my own impatience would catch its fire next, I thought I could leave everything behind. Just up and walk away. Just head for Hollywood, its glitter and its lure.

Now I know this: I could no more have stopped myself from writing *Left and Right* than I could keep a cloud from raining.

I know every Aryan proverb by heart.

Don't look at me like that.

I'm nearly biting off my tongue when I hear one more time the corny story of the Holocaust, which is our daily sop. It's Whitey's victuals. There's no relief—not ever.

When it comes to my past and heritage and owning up to it, I am still raw and shy, and with my best foot forward. But I measure myself by my relatives' standards, and not by Hollywood's. Let that be clearly known.

My relatives are like old songs—songs with the smell of hay. I feel their ethnic tap root stir in me and burrow deep and bring up those forgotten nutrients on which my past was grown. It is my past; it still belongs to me—and Hollywood won't wrestle it from me. For I have forebears, too.

They suffered, and they died.

From their portraits they stare down at me with their ancient, blue, pacifist stares, and I know that as long as I still walk with sand in my shoes, I can't be at peace with myself. I need to walk barefoot, like Josie.

I didn't understand all that until I was much older.

For many years, I stayed away, because these people hurt me, particularly Archibald.

"Once a Hun, always a Hun!" he told me many times when out of earshot of the clan.

It happens every time as I go back, periodically, right after the harvest is safely garnered and just before the colors fade from the last days of fall, to be engulfed with familiarity, to soak up that old smell.

A Hun? Unspoken is the slur he might have used, but didn't. That was his private verdict, and is his verdict still, but what does that fool know?

The man is blind. He is so blind he has to finger everything. He always fingers me: "—and what about the ovens? And what about the Jews?"

Well? What about the Jews?

That question mushrooms suddenly, without the slightest warning, out of the clear blue sky. It stigmatizes instantly. It hobbles every thought.

"Just what did we do wrong," I ask myself, "except to lose the war?"

So let him think I am a Nazi. I think he is a milk-and-water moralist. He suspects I won't make it to heaven. I, on the other hand, have been to hell and back.

I walked through my Fatherland's ashes.

When I left Mennotown to try my luck in Hollywood, I took my old, Ukrainian nanny's name for my good luck charm, to be safe, and I packed Lilo's dream.

To be a writer for the screen was one of several dreams that Lilo and I shared when we were teenagers in war-torn Germany. That is galling to Archie—to hear about Lilo. He does not understand that it was Lilo's life, and Lilo's death, that made me what I am. When it comes to my sources, I will take orders from no one, not even Archibald.

While I still lived in Mennotown, I was never myself; I settled for somebody else. I had to leave, for Archie's prayers would

have strangled me—for he had come, I knew, and crushed my much-beloved Fatherland and stonily laid Lilo's brave, young life to ashes. He was the one who took his gun and pointed it at Jonathan long after all the bombing stopped. He helped the fellow with the bigger mustache. To his eternal shame.

I, too, will have my reckoning. One day I will return for good, to find that warmth again, that prayer-warmth, deep in that ethnic quilt, bypassing Archibald.

I had no idea I would tap into feelings that strong. When I first started working on my play, I thought that I was a mosquito trying to buzz an elephant. As a producer friend once said: no film in Hollywood can win, unless you break at least five of the Ten Commandments.

Yet *Left and Right* won handsomely, which ought to tell you something. That was no accident.

"Next, I will have to tell them about Erika," I think, but something within shrinks away. It is painful to speak about her. Ever since the world has started calling me by my artistic name, I have forgotten about Erika.

I spent years distancing myself. She's dead now. Tasha lives. She leads a rich and lavish life in Malibu, surrounded by the Jews.

It's still that old, crazed fear.

It's easier to go along with the prevailing attitude, to say with nonchalance: "Yes. Yes. Indeed. There was a devil on the loose in Nazi Germany. He had a tail and hooves. He was up on the mountain. Me, I was down below."

I need to learn to stand up tall, look Archie straight in his left eye—he lost his right one in an ethnic brawl, way back in World War I because he was a German—and say to him as calmly as I can: "But that's not how it was! You have your facts all wrong!"

That's what I need to say.

I see the trembling cross as it is sliding, slowly, over golden patches. I think: "Way down below, there grows the wheat of

Apanlee. Those are the nuggets of which history is made. It's not the Hebrew's gold."

How many of them know? Does anybody care?

There lies the quilt my Russian-German relatives commenced to stitch with diligence and care when Lizzy landed in the prairie more than a hundred years ago, believing that as long as preachers led the faithful in a hymn, good values couldn't help but triumph over bad. She had her values straight. When she sailed the Atlantic, she brought not just the trunk that held the wheat, she brought her non-stop prayers she uttered in High German, the language of her Lord whom she loved more than life. There were no questions in those days as to identity in ethnic terms; there was firm certainty. It mattered little that her native soil was the Ukraine—her language was the language of the country she called her Fatherland with pride. As she would tell her brood a thousand times: "What if a cat has kittens in the oven? Does that make kittens cookies?"

She was an Aryan woman. Let us remember that. Before she came to Kansas to settle on the soil that would grow bread to feed the world, she packed the following: self-discipline, trustworthiness, thrift, diligence, goodwill, neighborly charity, fidelity and pride. In other words, she packed her bedrock values. She never spent a dollar foolishly. Nobody paid her way. She lived a life with satisfaction guaranteed, and when she died, in the Depression, she knew, and so did the entire state of Kansas, that she had lived correctly.

That needs to be said, too. Her way of life was virginal. She had blue eyes. Blond hair.

There was not one of them who did not have blue eyes. She left her progeny, of whom there are so many now you cannot count them all, and they are blond and blue-eyed.

Their gaze is hooded now; their spirit shackled, sadly.

To this day, they are strong and hardy; they all grew strong on air and hymns and healthy food; and every one of them believes, this in the face of our sappy world, that it is mostly food

and singing that sets them still apart.

That's how they've been debased.

That's all it takes, they think—just healthy food and lusty hymns and Faith and proper credit to the Lord. That's why their children go to church like little wooden dolls, in all their finery, to hear and take to heart what Archie has to say.

Judeo-Christianity starts early and runs deep in Mennotown, where bingo is forbidden and nicknames clues to vanity. That's Archie's turf. He guards it with ferocity. When I give lectures and tell audiences that there was once a place called Apanlee, they stare and have nothing to say.

Few youngsters, growing up in Mennotown, still have a martyr's memory. High German is already barely breathing; Low German, in another generation, will be gone.

"How much do you remember?" one of the youngsters asked me recently. To him, my people's past is ancient—our war reduced to "Auschwitz," our struggle vilified, our soldiers demonized.

How much did I forget?

Three weeks lay, for example, between the death of Lilo, my best friend, and when the Allies finally arrived—but I remember nothing of that stretch of time. Not one small morsel. Nothing. I do remember clearly, though, the day when Archie and his Negro friend arrived in prostrate, bombed-out Germany, both chewing Wrigley's Gum.

I don't remember, either, how I came to America.

I know the bullets had stopped flying; the Allies were bent over Germany, quartering my Fatherland as though it were an animal as vicious as they come—and not the place where Heidi lived her clean, strict, dedicated life, and Lilo rode her bicycle.

I loved Lilo a lot. I loved Heidi. I loved Jonathan, too, although shyly.

All three of them are dead.

There's much I don't remember rightly. There's much I won't forget.

Then came the bitter and humiliating time I still remember clearly—the stupefying postwar years. The Nuremberg Trials. The whispers about Morgenthau. There was no food in Germany, defeated and divided. There was no fuel. There was no pride, no splendor. Those few of us who had survived—by means we knew not how!—flung our lives against the likes of Archibald like moths into the flame.

You couldn't buy a button or a needle; the shelves were bare; the people starved; for weeks, we ate nothing but mushrooms. That's when my mother curled her toes around her wooden sandals and went to Archibald and said: "Me, too," and Archie sneered: "We don't owe you a living! There's no free ride for you!" and Mimi tossed away the last shred of her dignity and spoke with downcast eyes: "I hope your holidays went well?"

I never understood how she could compromise like that. I never did, but then, I guess, I blotted out a lot.

When I arrived in Mennotown, I curtsied to my relatives in honor of my betters. I soon enough found out: nobody did that here.

"No need to genuflect," said Archibald, while giving me the evil eye. "This is America. We're equal in America."

Says who?

Blood boils between Archie and me. For years, we passed each other on the sidewalk without speaking. For years, I feared and loathed him. Now I no longer fear him.

His God is very old and has a giant ear, like the satellite dish that sits atop three rusty poles with which he listens in on hirelings up on the Hill whom he now either sponsors or subverts with the help of a muddled but stridently militant pulpit.

These days, he does soul-saving electronically. He will not ever win me to his ways, old sinner that I am, with little to repent. He knows that. So do I.

He rubs it in at every opportunity: "We've got to watch you folks. Your goose will soon be cooked. Why do you look at me like that—sort of funny?"

In Mennotown you walk into the thick of it—into the attitude that all the Germans ever did in World War II was turn the Hebrews into cinders. That comes not just from Hollywood; it flows right from the pulpit. Judeo-Christianity. You can't go wrong if you condemn the Holocaust. It works like a charm, every time.

And yet, I watch Archie with awe. He is setting the churches afire with Faith. He knows how to rally his troops.

"You start with a given," says Archie, who glorifies God while berating the sinners. "And it's this: That it is better to speak truth than lies. That it's better to live clean than dirty."

Precisely.

And what does he offer his folks, I think as the heat floods my face and my stomach knots up and my heart fills with rage, that Heidi's Führer, Lilo's Führer didn't offer his disciples a hundred times over and more? Salvation. Peace. Clean living. Decency.

Self-discipline rather than stupor.

Honesty rather than falsehoods.

Robust harvests in place of sick weeds.

In the name of the Cross, said the Führer. On behalf of a world filled with beauty. On behalf of a world free of filth.

I've heard it said from Jonathan's own lips that if you gazed too deeply into the Führer's eyes, you fainted from his dream.

Why do I tell you this? I have no choice but to be faithful to my nature; that is why. It didn't used to be that way, for Archie crippled me. It's only now that I have come to realize that there is rubble to be cleared away from my own Aryan soul.

It has been many years since I arrived in Mennotown out of the fratricidal war that buried not just flesh but spirit, sitting at Wednesday devotions, fire on my cheeks and cotton in my ears. They claim that I so hated Archibald that I braided my hair counter-clockwise. That I slept in my bed upside down.

When it was clear to Archibald I would not have my soul be

fingered, I had to leave, and Archie stayed, and everyone was glad. Maybe old Josie shed a tear or two. She was the only one.

When I left Mennotown, I was in a hurry to get somewhere fast. Five days before my sixteenth birthday, and doubting I could ever calm myself, I made my thumb point west and hopped onto a pickup truck and ended up in Hollywood. Now I reside in Malibu where I live in a worldly sense, as Archibald would say, and all the younger folks in Mennotown, the ones that lean toward the Methodists and Presbyterians, are very proud of me.

Not so the oldsters, though, for Archie sees to that. At their church rummage sales, they buy each other's doilies and give him every penny. They have their doubts. I am their object of curiosity.

They know me only through the stories that Archie has invented.

He suspects that I dabble in karma. He is eager to broadcast the worst. I've heard of an owl that bites off the paws of a mouse to keep it in its nest, and Archie is like that.

He is free to say what he wants. I am free to deny it, however.

It's very simple, really. It's not historically correct to say it was the Führer who captivated, magnetized and charmed young people by the millions—young people such as Jonathan. Or Mimi. Lilo. Heidi.

For Heidi, it was mostly order. It was large babies with a lot of energy. And peace. And certainty. And pride. For Heidi, it was sweet and virginal. Mysterious. She took the Führer like a lover to her heart because he understood the fabric of her being.

Or take Marleen, the matriarch of Apanlee. The Führer was her savior, the genuine Messiah. Did that make her a criminal? She was one of the steppe's richest women, yet she owned but two dresses—a dress in which to work, and one in which to pray. She always prayed in German, since her Bible was written that way. Her family was slaughtered savagely before the Führer came. The Führer was her god. He was the best her hard and bitter life

brought forth; he gave enormous pride to people beaten to the ground.

My mother, Mimi. She as well.

She was one of the first, way back in the Ukraine, to practice the Führer salute. To this day, Mimi argues for the Führer; she'll argue to the latest hour that it is wrong to say that it was merely plunder. That it was hate. And spite. And wanting superiority.

"The Jews are like a hydra," claims Mimi, when Archie needles her. "One body, many heads." She argues that she hates it how they nose themselves through Wichita. She says Americans are dense and dumb, wilfully arrogant, ruled by collective ignorance. She says they slave for their exploiters without thinking. My mother knows so little of smooth manners.

She claims that as this country aches for a decisive leader not yet beholden to the usurers, still dragging nation after nation into beggary, the people should remember—if you please!—that, way back in the thirties, at least in Germany, the future walked in light.

"The *Führer*'s message is just as relevant today as it was then," says Mimi. "If you ask me—more so, today, than ever. Why did we lose? Because your numbers triumphed over race and reason? Because the Germany we knew and loved was overwhelmed, not overcome? That quantity, not quality, won out?"

I only need to watch the teeming underbelly of America to know that it is so.

"Sure. Sure. The ovens one more time," sneers Archibald.

The war goes on and on. The news reels never stop.

"It has been almost fifty years," claims Mimi, "yet still the Führer's spirit dances across Europe, clad in his fiery robe, igniting brush and shrub."

That's Mimi, who was victimized as well, which is forgotten now. She looks at me, accusingly, and asks:

"Well? Speak your piece. Don't sit there, only listening. Answer me. Speak up. What do you think?"

What do I think? Here's what I think: I think that if salvation

ever comes, it has to come with truth. With naked truth inspected with clear eyes.

I know back home, at Apanlee, the Jews and we lived side by side, for centuries. The Jews left us alone, and we left them alone. We didn't hurt each other. We lived in worlds apart.

But then the Beast sprang from the canyons of New York and started crunching bone. It clawed at our race and swallowed our males, and shortly after I was born, my people had no men.

That, too, must be called genocide.

But then the Führer came. And wondrously, the swastika spelled calm.

And then the trek. The Allied firebombs. The Führer's city, ashes. The voice of Ilya Ehrenburg, the Jewish propagandist, who hectored the Red Army: "Kill! Kill! And kill! No one is innocent. Nobody! Nobody! Neither the living nor yet the unborn."

It was rivers of Aryan blood in the gutters.

What happened to Natasha, for example, is to this day a question mark. She was an Aryan, too—of Russian ancestry. She wasn't even kin. There's no museum squatting in the heart of Washington to mourn for my dear Baba.

So much—so many died. I am one of the last who made it out of Apanlee, and let me tell you, for the record, that there's no guilt in me.

*

I feel the Kansas wind as I am stepping off the plane. The prairie in November lets you breathe. In the Midwest, the seasons write the script; there is a quietness, a stoic gathering about the sharp horizon that shouldn't be confused with calm. A force of nature. Imminent. Preceding an austere but beneficial country rain.

These people hold the fort. They know the year is running out of days. They know about blocking and tackling. They may not know it yet, but all of them perch at the edge of history.

I count on them. They will link arms to cross a stream, their instincts welding them.

The moment Archie spots me at the Baggage Claim, he fixes me with his left eye, steps forward, and turns breezy. "Well, how's it going, Sputnik? All systems set to go?"

We give each other harmless smiles. We act as if we are the fattest relatives.

"Say cheese and smile," winks Archibald, elbows a few reporters, and snaps himself a Polaroid to send to the *Wichita Eagle*.

I relish this small interlude, amid the flash of cameras, on spindly heels, with naked toes, strobe lights exploding in my face, snarling traffic with my autographs. Since *Left and Right* turned out to be an unexpected winner, the media dogs me everywhere.

Next, Archie winks: "Well, look at you! My, my! As gaudy as an Easter egg. They say you have so many clothes that you can change your outfit every day. You'll have yourself being gossiped about. You know that, don't you, Sputnik?"

Against my will, I say: "I buy my things on sale." My mouth is dry. My heart is pounding. I know what will come next, and sure enough:

"Well, have you found yourself a rich and comfortable bachelor as yet?"

That's Archie—he goes for the jugular swiftly.

"There's four mighty fine fellows in my congregation—" says Archie. "You'd have your pick. You could do worse, you know. If you would only take advice, you'd know—"

"Please, Archie. Not again."

I ache with the effort of unspoken words. I feel that old, familiar numbness coming over me but manage to keep silent, while Archie tends an itch atop his cranium.

"—you'd know that if you joined, you'd have your choice of charities, what with—"

"I said please don't—"

"—what with your famous name. What with your fine connections all over Hollywood, you could—"

"I cannot be what you would call a genuine Christian—" I try to interrupt, and Archie finishes his thought:

"—you could do so much good. You could help carve the Kingdom of our Lord Christ Jesus who gave His life from love for sinners just like us—"

We both stare ahead, both very solemn and correct, both knowing that time has blurred nothing.

A billboard warns as we leave Wichita: "Don't trash our town." A deep growl is embedded in that sign. Don't trash America!

Towns smell as people do—some clean, and others dirty. Wichita smells like its slaughter yards on Twenty-First and Market, but Mennotown, I know from visits past, smells clean. It's spic-and-span, this Midwest German town, with smells you take in through both nostrils, lustily, while walking through young pine woods, or between well-scrubbed laundry dried in the morning air, or sitting in a coffee house, depending on which way the wind just happens to be blowing.

I like to visit here. Each year, I visit for a week, but one week is enough.

"Were it not for this man who's sitting next to me," I think, "I wouldn't mind staying a bit." For he knows. And I know. And it is this: He talks about the end result, but nobody questions the path.

The path was everything.

Why was it, for example, I'd really like to know, that this old toady's allies all sported and displayed the pentagrams on their gray, furry caps? That's what I want to know.

Americans wore white. The Bolsheviks wore red. On tanks. Planes. Uniforms. But it was Satan's logo.

That's why I still go back, to my own roots, to listen to my past, incomprehensible to most, like a forgotten language.

Each year, when I return, I see that the Midwest has changed a little more. Each year it's darker. Grittier. Each year there's

more graffiti.

"That is because the Donoghues have intermixed," says Archie angrily, who reads my thoughts, and steps hard on the gas.

The Donoghues are still considered rabble. Their offspring are as common and as grimy as the streets of Wichita. They still lead their scandalous lives. They have all sorts of rights the Midwest farmers never even knew existed, but they complain of wrongs.

"And where it will end, I cannot begin to imagine," scolds Archie.

"You wonder," I agree.

His brow is furrowed now. The spittle flies. "They keep on having children, some good, some bad, but all of them on welfare. No morals there. No discipline. All having different fathers."

"Some colored, Archibald?"

"You're darn right, Sputnik. Right! Unfortunately, that's part of it. Precisely!" That's still where Archibald, in every other way a Democrat, all for equality and giving every fellow a fair shake, tends his big grudge against the bureaucrats. "The Feds have dough for almost any cause as long as you are intermixed," sneers Archie.

"Is that a fact?"

"They keep pushing entitlement modes. They give unworthy people subsidies and loans so they can multiply like rabbits—"

Right. But if I voice a heresy like that—what with my German accent and with my German past—all of my motives are in question. He sees no parallels. He holds the Scriptures in one hand and shakes his index finger at the social order with the other.

"He can afford to hitch his morals to misogyny," I think. Aloud, I try to say as calmly as I can:

"But if I say, for instance, that keeping one's own ethnic pool as strong and pure as possible is laudable—"

"You can't say things like that!" scolds Archibald. "That's Nazi talk. Not to say racist, Sputnik."

"But didn't you just—?"

"You can't say things like that around here. Just you remember that."

"Why not?"

"This is America. We're equal in America."

Which, he thinks, ends the argument.

Next he says this: "I hear that *Left and Right* is going through the roof?"

"That's what they say," I tell him modestly.

"How many zeroes, Sputnik?"

"You'd be amazed to know."

But Archie only sniffs. "A zero here, a zero there, that is the modern way. You can't grow real wealth based on zeroes. It's like I always tell my kids, you've got to practice stewardship. Just practice proper stewardship—"

The Lord gave Archibald his share of sons and daughters, this after Archie finally threw caution to the wind and married Temperance. Now, for my benefit, he counts his offspring's virtues on his fingers. "I taught my children personally that, by themselves, they all add up to nothing. Life's seasoning is Faith."

I know most all of them—all fine and upright citizens, equal to Satan's challenge. Some have preceded him and rest already in eternity; but most are still alive. The carpets in their homes are inches thick. When that old Kansas wind is blowing, they all wear woolen underwear. One opted for a lucrative career in dentistry. A second is a known environmentalist; a third is anti-nuclear, on account of his pacifist roots. One female teaches Anabaptist history. Still yet another, Norah Leigh—born after Noralee died and just before the geezer, Doctorjay, wed Abigail—works as a postal carrier in Mennotown's main office, a job she held for more than forty years. There was some talk about retirement a few years back, but Nora Leigh convinced the government that would be mental cruelty: her life would be curtailed beyond repair if she no longer knew who got his mail from whom.

A few years back, her oldest son ran for Congress on the

Moral Majority ticket, but missed election by an inch.

"He lost," claims Archibald, "because he didn't have sufficient visibility, which was the reason why he turned into a televangelist. He is a real Epp that way. He knows the politicians on the Hill are ripe and ready for the Gospel."

A pious Anabaptist zeal runs deep in straight-line Epp descendants. They do not scatter among Lutherans. Or visit arcades or, for that matter, ice cream parlors. Never! Or roll their socks. Or take up hockey as a sport. Or waste their sentiment on nicknames.

The Epps have multiplied and multiplied again. There are so many Epps, by now, you cannot count them all. A fraction only lives in Mennotown; the rest are in chronic retreat—from the world and its wicked temptations. They farm in Grand Forks, Mountain Lake and Freeman, South Dakota; they carry on in Iowa; they frown with disapproval the moment visitors arrive: a faster pace of singing, up there in Winnipeg! They know they must be ever vigilant to spot the mischief of the Fiend. It's vigilance that sets an Epp apart!

"It took two years and some enormously expensive travel to trace the entire Epp family tree," explains the Epp clan patriarch who's sitting next to me. "Percentage-wise, most of our first names start with M. Not mine, of course. I think that's odd. Don't you?"

"Not really. No."

"I do."

The Epps all keep on shedding spirit pollen, all teaching heathens stealthily and patiently how to let go of gods of stone. One grandchild, Archie tells me proudly, is affiliated with a church that has a growing edge in Africa and Indonesia. Another witnesses in Haiti where gospelling is striking sturdy roots. You find Epps everywhere. Not a few live in Minnesota. Some in Brazil. In Canada. You find them even in the high plateaus of Mexico and in the thorny hell of Paraguay where, odd to say, the hottest season is December, the cold comes from the south in

June, the moon hangs upside down; palms dot the land like an army of one-legged soldiers, "—and where, or so some people claim, this sadist doctor that the Jews are always after, this Joseph-what's-his-name, is hiding out among old Nazi brass," says Archie, giving me a sidelong glance.

"Well, are they making headway?"

"It's up to the authorities," grunts Archibald. "They have their own agenda."

I take care to admire the fence posts. I mention the weather, still mild for this time of the year. I also comment on the ruts in the asphalt.

Not that that stifles Archie, who is like a bloodhound that way.

"I hope they catch him soon. I hope they hang him in Jerusalem. Although I must confess: I've had it now. The Hebrews always think they are the navel of the universe. I've had it up to here."

"No kidding."

"Who do they think they are? They kvetch—they don't stop kvetching! Are they the only ones who have a patent on the Wailing Wall? Is that their copyright?"

There is a lightness in my head and ringing in my ears. That's what I'd like to know.

I stare out of the window. This is some country here. I know the neighbors will cook up come mighty meals to put some meat on me.

We drive through fields and yet more fields—some grain, but mostly stubble. While Archie keeps on staring straight ahead, his neck getting ever more mottled, I watch the tractors, throbbing rhythmically, while several long-haired youngsters sit atop with earphones on, sipping Coke through plastic straws while listening to Randy Travis.

"Those kids just shift the levers leisurely and push assorted buttons; the tractors do the work," brags Archibald, while looking at me sideways.

We drive along in silence. Now that we are alone and he is gathering diplomacy, he doesn't call me Sputnik, and I begin to sense just what is troubling him.

He clears his throat. "Our folks are moving with the times. We are not that old-fashioned."

"I know."

"The media makes us out that way, but we move with the times."

"Well, who believes the media?"

"Right. Well. Ahem. We have a lot of pride in our machinery. Especially our combines. Those babies cut and thresh up to a thousand bushels of winter wheat per day. You might just want to mention that tomorrow."

"All right."

"Why don't you mention that? How up-to-date we are? How we're moving with the times?"

"Why not? I'll be glad to oblige you that way."

"We aren't as dumb as some people think." His voice has turned defiant. "We're modern folks. We're interfaith. I've checked it out. We've got to think global these days."

"I'm glad you think so, Archie."

"Now that the Berlin Wall has fallen, we know it was our wheat the Russian wanted all along," says Archie, coming at me sideways.

"Last time, that was my argument."

He gives me a suspicious look. "Build that up in your keynote, Sputnik. Be inspirational. Uplifting. Give credit where credit is due. That would please many folks."

"All right."

"Oh, that reminds me. That reminds me. There's this reporter from the *Eagle* who asked if he could do an interview. Now that your movie is a hit, I thought we might discuss a slant—"

"Why not?"

"What will you say?"

"What do you mean, what will I say? I'll answer the report-

er's questions."

He inches a bit closer. "The other day, I heard an earful."

"Such as?"

"Are you involved with folks who call themselves Revisionists?"

"I read them, if that's what you mean."

At once, he hectors me: "You know that isn't good for you. That's dangerous. That's foolish. That's harmful to your health. Why stir up memories? It will bring your stomach pains back."

"Don't worry about that."

His head doesn't move, just his eye. He clears his throat. "Some papers claim you said that Jewish and conniving go together."

"I never said that, Archie."

"Well, you came close. You better watch it, Sputnik. Some folks will read between the lines. All through that movie script, you kept on dropping hints. About the Jews. And their shenanigans. If I were you, I'd be real careful. Real careful. And I mean careful. Careful is the word."

"All right. I said all right."

"This is America. We don't agree with stuff like that. Nobody doubts the Holocaust. Besides, the Jews—they have their noses everywhere; they know how to follow the stink. They're much too powerful, if you ask me, but on the other hand, we've got to get along. There's this one Jew, for instance, approving every grant—"

"Is that a fact?"

"Around here, we are civilized. We've got to let bygones be bygones. We wouldn't want to have an odious repeat of history, now would we? In this country?"

Those are his exact words. His blustery, insincere face has turned purple, and I see tiny droplets forming underneath his nose.

"Go on."

"Well. Now." He tells the steering wheel: "What can a fellow do? The Catholics revere the rosary; the Lutherans the Trinity; the Jews the Holocaust. You better not mention that stuff.

We wouldn't want to spoil the keynote, now, would we? We wouldn't want to get the delegates all hopping mad, now, would we? You can't go wrong with being inspirational and patriotic and leave the Holocaust alone. Just stick to generalities, and all will work out smooth."

"I answer only to myself," I say, but only to myself. It's still that old, crazed fear. He still sees history, I think, through the wrong end of a distorting telescope, where every woe is magnified for them and every hurt that we endured is tiny.

Out loud I say: "Don't worry. Just don't fret. I promise you that I won't breathe a word about the Hebrew Holocaust."

"Right. Right. Let's shut the door forever on that unhappy episode."

"Right. That's my very point."

"I don't like the tone of your voice."

I say between clenched teeth: "Why do we keep on fighting World War II five decades after it was lost for Germany? We lost. And you guys won. So let it be. Just let it be. Let go. Who gains by stirring up the past?"

"Good. Fine. That is my point. Exactly. That puts my mind at ease. I'm glad you think so. Truly!" Now Archie beams with gratitude, deflating. "That's fine. Just fine. That's what I always say."

He starts to chat; he is chummy; one thing leads to another. He is not one of those who want to turn the present back into the past; the past is the past, and the present the present; you can't re-write a single page; some things were not that clear-cut in that war and some of it—well, murky.

I make another bargain with myself while sitting next to Archie: I will speak up. Tell all. One of these days, I will.

But childhood fears run deep, and I have never had the courage which, for instance, my good friend Lilo had.

Now there was bravery. When she and I were young, in war-torn Germany, my cowardice was one long, never-ending nightmare, but Lilo had the touch. She had that inner honor that shone

from clear blue eyes. By contrast, even now, I am as fearful as a rabbit, as though the first part of my young life didn't count.

"Look! Over there. That's Jan's and Josie's grandsons, over there. See? You can tell who's a Neufeld, can't you?"

Right. You can't miss a Neufeld. You look at them and know there must be something to those genes that came from Apanlee. They are a clan apart. They are easy to spot by their passionate love for the soil. They aren't afraid to take risks, to experiment, to move into various endeavors. Some strange, persistent streak of genius strains hard to find expression.

One claims a patent on a gadget that attaches to up-to-date threshers. Another won three medals for streamlining the creamery. A third perfected a gate latch for cattle. They prosper, and they multiply. Their tomb stones testify.

"No bloodshed for princes and kings," they have proclaimed for centuries. And if a worldly ruler tried to tax them for their pacifist tradition, they knew precisely what to do: they packed and left and said: "Be this, again, God's will."

Determined every other way, accomplished every other way, time and again, they voted with their feet. Yet, here's my question mark: what do they know of ethnic pride? Its glory, and its cost?

I bite my lip. The town car gives a lurch.

The day has not yet melted into twilight as we glide into Mennotown.

There is a Janzen Court. There is a Harder Street. Sleek taxicabs, controlled by traffic lights, speed along Siemens Avenue, around the rim of Penner Park.

We pass the library that Josie helped to build by raising every penny with huge spaghetti feeds. It bears her husband's name.

Around the corner, to the left, we pass the place where Lizzy's sod house used to be, next to the Women's Shelter, where Little Melly's special cross stitch secrets are still taught.

Jan's steam mill, to the north of Mennotown, is now a modern restaurant, a popular tourist attraction. You can order *vareniki*

there, an ethnic specialty, prepared from yellowed recipes that have been handed down from family to family—or so claims the brochure that must have cost a dime, a nickel and a penny.

I know the place; I've dined there many times. Blond, blue-eyed youngsters serve you home-baked bread grown from the winter wheat Peet Neufeld traded from the Tartars—imported to America a century ago. A reproduction of the wheat bin Lizzy brought from Russia hangs prominently on the wall, next to the framed first nickel Lizzy earned, the one she vowed she'd never spend. And didn't.

The town car purrs. It's landmark after landmark, but time has not stood still. Beside the Unemployment Office, the Friesen store still stands, updated and remodeled. Next to it, Express Mail. Not all that many years ago, it was a mirthful Noralee who did her postal clerking there. I never met her, but she lives. She lives in memory. Still shrill. Still undiminished and rotund. Now there was ethnic color!

Ah, Noralee!

She scrubbed the linens every day, way back at Apanlee. By hand, she rinsed her children's diapers in the waterhole of Apanlee; her grandchild owns a chain of Laundromats. Another grandchild runs a grocery store, filled wall to wall with peaches, plums and gooseberries, with labels telling visitors the seeds came all the way from Apanlee, sewn into Noralee's skirt hem to keep it prim across her ankles.

Child-rich but penny-poor, the moment Noralee hit prairie soil, she waylaid Doctorjay, half-Lutheran, half-Christian, the Lord at his periphery because he guzzled so! There is the corner, by that lamp post, where her husband lost his life. It has been almost fifty years since Doctorjay collided with that calf and crushed himself inside his flivver, but this is still remembered and repeated, as are the many juicy tales of Noralee who passed on before he did, whom he forsook, the moment she passed on, for Abigail—who was a Donoghue, if you remember, Sputnik!—a Donoghue, a harlot, and a flirt!

Once every two years—July through August or September, provided the weather is placid—the Elder Archibald takes senior citizens of Mennotown on trips to Russia. That is his hobby now. As a sideline, he smuggles his Bibles. He snaps his Polaroids of the abandoned and neglected steppe where, in the olden days, the tsarist Cossacks roamed and where one princeling, once upon a distant time, was fed a bowl of noodle soup by Jan's and Josie's folks. He checked the story out. A few years back, he talked the Soviet guide into a little detour, and when he found it finally, this place called Apanlee, it disappointed mightily.

"Just crumbling buildings. Broken fences. Dilapidated—floor to ceiling. High weeds between the cobble stones."

"How sad."

"A goat or two, maybe. That's all. That's all that's left. That is God's punishment for straying from the path."

His face, so jovial up to now, has become cold and hard. Now he is chewing on his mustache, overwrought. "Now, Sputnik, tell me this. Why don't we ever learn from history? Now our country is decaying. We should have learned from them. When they went godless over there, at Apanlee, that's how it all began."

"If you say so."

"Now people keep on tossing spitballs here, instead of rolling up their sleeves. Where will it end? Why can't we put an end to all the moral rot?"

He echoes many farmers, aghast at what they see. They have no name for it. They have no frame of reference. Their past has been stolen from them. You can see many crusty oldsters sitting in their rocking chairs, reading their Daily Devotions, turning page after page with huge, wheat-gnarled hands. They are the newly disenfranchised—this in a country they helped build and which is still their home.

There is no doubt that even Mennotown has started its decay in spirit and in fact. The Jensen home, now crumbling at the edges. The brand new grammar school has many classrooms—

thirty, forty?—and is connected through an intercom. Neglecting the Three R's, kids learn about such things as birth control and Stay-Away-From-Drugs. The latest horror is the condom push; and worse is yet to come.

"They don't learn hymns and catechism, and prayer is outlawed," grieves Archibald.

"Well, what's your remedy?"

"Apply the paddle! Use the paddle! That's what I always say."

"I see."

"Our teachers can no longer teach; now they patrol the halls, because twelve-year-old children carry guns. Can you imagine, Sputnik? Guns! We must outlaw all guns. I'm all for gun control. We need some gun control!"

*

So here I am, in Mennotown, on Josie's L-shaped couch, next to a pumpkin of a cousin. The neighborhood is watching Donahue. The relatives make sure they don't miss Donahue, an expert baby kisser.

"The Russians are coming! The Russians are coming!" yells Phil and runs into the audience, coattails flapping, to hand somebody else the microphone. He is a Liberal. He interrupts. He heckles.

"Just what are we afraid of? In Russia, you cannot even purchase toilet paper! Their queues are stretching over city blocks! They love our hamburgers and jeans! They're eager to try on democracy for size! Why are we so afraid to lend a helping hand?"

The relatives bob heads. Here is one talk show host who knows his arguments.

"Look at Vietnam," shouts Phil, and waves his microphone and scratches his gray head. "Look at El Salvador. Argentina. Panama. Nicaragua. The Philippines. Everywhere, a thousand quarrels. Why not, instead, adopt a thousand points of light?"

When Phil gets eloquent like that, nobody has a counter-ar-

gument.

"Why not, with so much strife, adopt a world-wide policy that's fair to everyone?"

One global village? One strong government? One market and one currency?

"His point of view, you must admit, is very hard to argue with," says Archibald authoritatively.

The folks nod to that, sagely. A thousand points of light in a revamped, re-ordered universe—they like that phrase a lot. That sounds magnificent.

"In fact, it's practically Biblical," says Archie, looking flushed.

The conversation drifts. The coffee scent is wafting. No matter what the time of day, somewhere there is a coffee pot. A cousin starts to speculate that Phil might be related to the Donoghues of Mennotown, who all vote the Democrat ticket—provided you can get them to the polls, a mighty undertaking. They're still a lazy bunch, one step removed from bums.

"Assuming they can all walk down the primrose path," as Archie puts it archly.

"There is no rousing them to any honest work—"

"They know which side their bread is buttered on, and every one of them—"

"—and every one of them is heading for the trough."

"Entitlements. Up to their dirty ears."

This makes the townsfolk mad. If they would only try—so goes the argument on Josie's L-shaped couch—they could catch the American dream. It's there. Within reach. For the asking.

"They ought to at least try to save a little more to have a nest egg for the future, but do they do it? No."

One Donoghue, for instance, is now in charge of underwriting loans that Washington doles out to subsidize the crop. He throws his weight around, that one. He sits behind his desk—feet up, smirk on his face and polish on his fingernails—and all the farmers have to go to him each fall to finance next year's harvest.

A second Donoghue has found himself a cozy nest in the

ranks of Affirmative Action.

A third is busy with the homeless—hotfooting it with special airline vouchers back and forth to Washington, while farmers struggle to buy gas. And several of his older sons, still teenagers, already make a beeline for the loot, romancing with the Blacks.

"Why mongrelize the neighborhood?" is what they want to know. They're all for giving everybody a fair shake, since this is still America. But where does it say we must mix?

Not in their Old World Gospel, still in the Gothic script.

I watch them as they warm their chairs, alone with my own thoughts. In Mennotown, the spotted owl is not important; it's politicians playing re-election games; both pro-life outcomes for the unborn innocents and pro-death punishment for hard-core criminals get thumbs-up signs; free trade is really just the only way to go; embargoing the wheat to stop the Soviets in Afghanistan upsets them mightily.

Sometimes there's benign disagreement between the young folks and the old, but one thing never changes: does anybody really think that anyone could really hurt America? The greatest country in the world? No way!

America. The Gospel is embedded in that word. In Mennotown, the Stars and Stripes have meaning.

It is a pleasant afternoon. It smells of *apfelstrudel.*

"The Hitler days are gone!" yells Phil, and runs into the audience, perspiring at the arm pits. "The Stalin times are gone! The only thing that's left is to clean up our act and do away with prejudice. If there's one lesson we have learned, it's this: We are created equal. We're all created equal."

"An agitated liberal, that's what he is," squirms Mimi, while giving Phil the evil eye. "Look at him, sidling up to Posner!"

The folks just glare at her. The Jews are less than popular in Mennotown, but still, you mind your manners. All Jews, they know, turn their opinions on a dime—to wit, this Posner fellow. Right on your television screen! That one is to be watched! They saw him switch his loyalties according to the breeze; the mo-

ment the Berlin Wall came crashing down, what did he do? He cleverly jumped horses in mid-stream, denying he had ever been at heart a Communist, maneuvering himself right next to Donahue with his philosophies.

"They are like that," says Mimi, now taunting Archibald.

"And what, precisely, do you mean by that?"

She starts to count her main points on her fingers. "No principles. No pride. No sense of self. No loyalty to anything or anyone. Say what you will, Jews just aren't lovable people—"

When she is agitated by her memories of war, my mother gets like that.

When she and I arrived in Kansas—just barely squeezing through the cracks, thanks to enduring kinship ties that helped us with our visas—she had no teeth; the Soveits knocked them out when they knocked Mimi to the ground and had their way with her.

My mother, Mimi, dug herself out of the ruins of Germany. She regrets nothing to this day. When she talks of the war and aftermath, she makes the relatives just cringe, but luckily, there is no bite to anything she says; she lost her teeth; that's why.

"Our only crime is that we lost a war," claims Mimi now, and lifts a trembling chin.

I edge a little closer. She is my mother, after all, although I think of her as Mimi.

When I was born, it took her weeks before she even found a name. I never really was her child; there was no time; there was a war; the country blazed in violence. I don't remember ever sitting next to her, her arms around my shoulders.

"It was a vicious war."

Nobody in that spotless kitchen approves of the atrocities of war. They're pacifists. Not that appearances would tell. It takes a trained eye to single out a pacifist today. It's easier with the ear, for their diphthongs still give them away. They are decidedly against the sword, but they approve of troops sent to the farthest corners of the world to protect other people's right to

vote themselves a democratic government as well.

They are warm-hearted people with squeaky-clean windows, clinging to custom, clinging to soil. They keep neat sidewalks; painted fences; mulberry rows along the streets amid huge fields of waving grain. In front of every home in Mennotown, you find a flower garden. Pride in their pristine, peaceful way of life is what unites the clan.

Each year, when all the work is done, they reunite in Wichita, renew the Covenant, and give thanks to the Lord and Provider. This week, the town is full of them, all relatives so well-to-do they bypass the Ramadas; they look for Sheratons and Hyatts to showcase their success. They travel with their Samsonites so packed with double underwear and flannel gowns they don't fit in the trunks. They don't waste electricity, not even in hotels.

It is that kind of thrifty spirit that has put our astronauts smack on the moon where you weigh less and can leap high, from where you can behold the earth the way the good Lord made it—all blue and blithe and shimmering, just floating in a sable sheen as evidence of His magnificence and might.

"My favorite place in the entire universe is Kansas," claimed Archie just the other day, while blessing the Rotarians, expressing thus a patriotic sentiment that made those twenty dollar bills just float into his hat.

"I dare you here and now to find another country equal to America to live and die in, Mimi," taunts Archie, while Temperance refills his cup.

"And you have no idea," snaps Mimi and works her needle back and forth into a sock, "how late it is already. How little time is left."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"It's true. Just wait and see. It's true."

"Aw! Gee! Come on now! Don't be silly."

Those are beguiling times when Archibald has Mimi to torment and Mimi counters, tit for tat, and people keep on taking sides, half-laughing and half-furious, until the two run out of

words and oldsters start to nod.

"This country is already faceless. Soon you will wish you never fought your war—"

She does not finish, knowing that the afternoon is long and arguments have to be savored to the fullest. Those two have long since made their peace; now she is baptized properly; she'll be in Heaven, too, where he is heading forthwith.

But still, if Archie has an audience, he likes to browbeat her.

My mother, on the other hand—though in her old age she is grateful for the nest that Archibald provided sumptuously when he permitted her to move into the flat where Little Melly used to live—has never learned to yield her memories when Archie launches into one of his tirades regarding her peculiar past.

"My war?" roars Archibald. "Come on! Get outta here! It was your war! It was your Führer's war!"

"Your war! That's what I said. You heard me right. Your war!"

"You were the ones who started it. We had to finish it."

"We did not!"

"Oh, yes you did! You did! We always finish other people's wars. We always have to clean up other people's messes."

"What messes? Are you kidding? When terror struck in Russia and took our men—our sons, our husbands, brothers, fathers!—and not one family was left untouched, where was America?"

"What do you mean, where was America?"

"That's right! Where were you guys? In bed with Joseph Stalin!"

She's gathering her steam. She mentions Prussia. Estonia. Latvia. Lithuania. Pomerania. She talks about Silesia. The Balkan nations. *Ach*! Though she has told the litany of Germany's defeat so many times that everybody knows it backwards, she cannot help herself. She wipes her eyes. She blows her nose. She cries while choking on emotions:

"Sit not in judgment, you! Your ally had the bigger mustache."

She has her memories.

She still remembers how Berlin was quartered and dismembered by the Allies—a bloody quarter thrown to every victor!—while she was hanging on a curtain rod behind some draperies.

Me, too. I huddled down below, in the potato cellar.

I was still small, but I remember clearly how Soviet soldiers came repeatedly and sliced the drapes with bayonets and snapped my mother's moral fiber. It happened yesterday.

I often heard my mother say she wishes she could go and die in Germany. She dreads her resting place, she says, amid uncomprehending strangers. She was there when the Allies let the butt of righteousness fall on her *Landsers'* shoulder blades, and she stood watching, weeping, as they were herded to Siberia with crutches in their armpits and stumps where legs had been.

"The war was done, and you? Don't talk to me of crimes. You handed innocents to Russia by the millions," cries Mimi. "Talk about ethnic cleansing!"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"At point of gun, you threw your kinfolk to the wolves. Your flesh and blood! Your relatives! That isn't taught in any of your schools. All that is still a well-kept secret! A whole civilization died, because the enemy set brother against brother, and the world isn't any the wiser—"

And Archibald, maliciously: "Maybe you had it coming?"

I think: "Here's where his nasty character comes out. Now's when he shows his colors."

"We are now writing 1989," says Mimi, her old eyes bright with pain, her tea cup rattling in her hand, "and still that war goes on."

She's right. That war has never stopped. It chokes the television set. It clogs the radio. It spills buckets of slime in the paper. It spells rape of mind, spirit and soul.

My mother was still young when she was driven out of Apanlee with bleeding heart and empty hands, caught between blazing guns of two determined dictators. Their cannons, equally,

spat smoke and shells and flames across the plains of the Ukraine. She still sees all those refugees as they poured westwards, westwards, in the direction of the sinking sun through all that ice and snow, a milling, stumbling horde. Her fingers fly; her breath comes in short gasps. "If Germany had won the war, instead of losing it because you were too dense to recognize the enemy that had you dancing to his tune, who would harp on and on about the Holocaust?"

"Look. There she goes again!"

"There isn't one of us who hasn't suffered, too. But do we bleed our neighbors? Are we moored to the Wailing Wall? Do we insist on having shrines at taxpayers expense for a disastrous war fought half a world away?"

For Mimi, with one foot already in the grave, the wounds of that war fester on. "What Holocaust?" she wants to know, and her old, beaten, wrinkled face takes on defiance and despair. She claims she knows of not one single case of setting fire to a synagogue and burning up the Jews—at which point Archie finds a bit of wood with which to poke his teeth.

He loosens a soft belch. "You can't deny the chimneys."

There is an awkward silence in the room, and everybody looks at Mimi.

"Dreamed up in Hollywood. Trademarked in Israel. Made in America."

"Ha! Listen to who's telling!"

"How often will you send your boys as cannon fodder just so the Jews can once again put diamonds in their pockets?"

I read their faces easily. While everybody digs into the *apfelstrudel*, I watch as Archibald is working up a steam because he senses there is still some mileage left in Mimi.

"And not a child in school today," cries Mimi, "is taught the truth about what happened. What really, truly happened. That innocents were sacrificed like cattle!"

But Archie bristles at the thought, and he is not alone. The relatives think proudly of their war—and, more so, of the aftermath. That's when the real business of recovery began, while

they were rehabilitating Europe.

"You've got to grant us that! Thanks to the Marshall Plan, we rehabilitated Europe! The speed with which the country turned to rehabilitating Europe was astounding."

And to what end? That is their question mark. This unrepentant Russian-German relative—along with others of her kind whom Mennotown went to such lengths to rescue from the rubble—is still a die-hard anti-Communist, one step removed from Nazi.

The truth be put where it belongs: she never did repent. Not Mimi.

My mother could have gone to night school when she first came to Mennotown, at taxpayers expense, to be re-educated—realigned politically. The opportunities were there. But no. She simply shrugged; she never even took out papers to become a proper citizen. That still goads Archibald. He glares at her. She swallows hard, shrinks back into her cushions, and speaks so softly it is hard to understand that, thank you, never mind, don't waste your time, she has a Fatherland to last her to her grave.

I listen to that, too, while keeping to myself.

My mother and her Kansas relatives cannot see eye to eye on anything pertaining to the war. The cousins sit there, munching popcorn after popcorn, with downcast eyes and hardened heart, wearing their Sunday best and trying not to muss it.

"What in the name of common sense did you see in your Führer?" baits Archie.

"Well, he was basically a dreamer of big dreams," says Mimi, still defiant, lifting a trembling chin. The relatives inspect the ceiling as though they have never seen it before.

She tells them one more time. She says he touched the sky. She says he shook the earth.

"Had not the cripple Roosevelt been jealous of the rebirth of Germany," says Mimi, "there would have been no way the Führer would have lost. Had not his cotery of Rosenmans, Kuhns, Loebs and Morgenthaus been jealous of the success of Germany, the

Führer would have won!"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"And you'll be next," she tells them with grim satisfaction.

"Ha!"

"And all your sappy talk about the greatest country in the world won't get you anywhere as long as you can't recognize what's being done to children. Your children! Your own children! In public schools. Out in the streets. In the arcades. In gang wars. Via television. These things are not mere accidents. It's planned. It's systematic wreckage. Destruction of your race. America, beset by predatory aliens subverting every law—"

That's Mimi. That's her sentiment. When she flails at her windmills, a show which only Archibald can trigger to full passion, she speaks against the guffaws in the parlor. My heart just aches for her. She has no teeth—the Russians knocked them out.

The years crept over Mimi. Her shoulders ache. Her spine caved in. Her eyes are now too dim to see the headlines, but she knows from her own experience who's who.

What's what.

She knows. My mother knows that it is still the Jews who are bedeviling the world in any way they can.

"She still thinks," whispers Temperance in the kitchen and helps herself to yet another slice of pie, "that Communism was a Jewish plot."

"They're all like that," nods Susan, a cousin thrice removed, born just before the Vietnam war. "You can't reform a Nazi." She, too, has often wondered why it is that foreigners will spread themselves all over other people's kitchens and then start arguing about those murky things the Allied armies settled half a century ago with gallows and with guns.

Right after Nuremberg, my mother came to Mennotown, so weak that she could barely crawl, with me in tow, her only living relative. She simply curled her frozen toes around her wooden clogs, crept through the rubble of Berlin, and said to some official: "I have some relatives in Kansas."

She found a law somebody dusted off, and one day, there she was, in shock that she had made it, sitting primly on a chair in Josie's sunny kitchen, me next to her, and next to me three tattered cardboard boxes containing our worldly goods—all that was left of Apanlee.

"Well, there you are, you two," said Josephine that day. "I better call the relatives. They'll want to take a look."

In the first postwar years in Mennotown, Displaced Persons were roundly disliked, and some of that rubbed off on me in my own teenage years. Some people tried to feel compassion for that dilapidated batch of refugees that Archie helped dig out from Berlin's blackened rubble, but it was hard if not impossible: their underthings were ragged; remorse was non-existent; the trusted Faith was not for them; to heal and to conceal them in the patchwork quilt of ethnic unity was quite an undertaking.

Still, blood is blood; you don't disown a kinsman. So we were taken in.

A phone call brought them all together in a hurry. Among them was Archie, pretending we had never met. Of course I did the same. A cat dislikes a dog.

That day, old Josie cautioned with a smile: "Watch out for Archibald. All you can do, dear child, is to lay low. Just duck and keep the lowest profile possible."

She smiled when she said that. She stroked my hair and smiled.

They say it was the first time since the White House telegram arrived, informing her that Rarey had been killed, that Josie found a smile.

I'll say it here and now: My mother has a point. She did survive the trek, the fury of the elements, but not without a price. There are deep scars in Mimi—as in a million of her generation. She is one voice, a timid one at that. She spent a lifetime waiting. Though she escaped, she left behind a child, its eyelashes coated with ice; she left behind her mother, dying, wrapped in a torn and frozen *Landser's* coat. She left behind one husband in

the tomb that was Siberia, another lying in his blood that seeped along the sidewalk of Berlin.

She sees Jews as a dangerous, underground power. They talk too fast and wave their arms, and their one aim—nursed over centuries—is to control the world.

"Is that another of your silly jokes?" says Archie, winking slyly, while settling down to an enormous supper. He has a grandniece, Sissie, who lives in Winnipeg and cleans and cooks for Jews. He points that out with pride that there's no racial prejudice in his own family.

"Not one small speck. Not even a faint whiff."

He says they treat her well, despite the Holocaust. He says she treats them likewise. It is well known in Mennotown that many Jewish families who chose America after the war prefer to use unmarried German relatives as maids, for almost all the European Jews speak broken German, and almost all the Kansas relatives do, too.

"Our Sissie, for example, works for four Jewish bachelors. She says they are just wonderful to her. Despite the Holocaust." He scans the parlor, a triumphant man. Who says that there is anti-Semitism in the midst of Mennotown? He even did a presentation on that topic in a synagogue for Jews, explaining how the Brethren, which is his congregation, were far and wide the only ones in the possession of the Truth, but generous with converts to a fault. He went so far as to invite the rabbis to visit him in turn and tell their point of view. They never did, alas. He wonders what he might have said that might have been offending.

But Mimi, stubbornly: "But don't you wish they would stop kvetching on and on about the Holocaust?"

"Shhh! Not so loud!" whispers somebody, fiercely, and Mimi shrinks into her cross-stitched cushions and licks her lower lip.

"You weren't there," says Mimi.

"Excuse me, but I was," says Archibald.

Those were his glory days. He is proud he was there when

Ivan met Joe by the Elbe. He likes to reminisce about the times when he and his young buddies celebrated all night long because the Hun had finally been whipped. He still remembers how they climbed up on trees and poles so they could better see the Soviet trampling on the Nazi flag and spitting on the swastika.

Did she forget the many CARE parcels that kept her alive right after the war? Did she forget her Nescafe? Her cakes of soap? Her cereal?

Compared to war-torn Europe, America was full of gold, like King Tut's tomb, and he was sent to share. He, Archie, was in charge of the entire loathsome business of digging deep into the blackened rubble and finding the survivors of the war. That's what he did; he dug. That's why he came; he shared. The Elder Archie volunteered to go to Germany to help the dregs of war, expecting a country in sackcloth and ashes. And where was his reward?

That's still his question mark.

He saw first-hand how all those Huns climbed from the rubble—this was before the Marshall Plan—to pass their buckets filled with stone and ash and mortar bits from hand to hand in long, humiliating lines.

"I stayed just long enough," he tells the munching people in the kitchen who heard this story many times but listen nonetheless the way you listen to a melody that touches a rhapsodic chord, "to watch how they were caught, these so-called Führer sympathizers, grabbed by the ears like rabbits in the fields, packed into cattle cars—" He said it then. He says it now. He looks around triumphantly. "—along with the dregs of the pitiful Wehrmacht. They had it coming. All of them. They got what they had coming."

He has forgotten why he lost an eye. America dispensing righteous wrath on Nazi Germany is still a memory that warms his preacher belly like a flame.

"My generation had no men," says Mimi softly, still on Josie's couch, her life now winding down.

I know that story, too. The splendid warriors of my mother's youth who hurled themselves against the Bolsheviks to stop the Antichrist—they froze to death at Stalingrad; they perished in the forests of Siberia and in the coal mines of Kolyma; they died like beasts of woe in Stalin's dungeon pits. No letter ever came out of the silence of the grave.

"They died like dogs," said Mimi. "When all was said and done, there was nobody left. A woman of my generation never had a chance to lead a normal life. To love a man. To raise a healthy family."

"Not true," says Temperance, and putters about in the kitchen. "You had a suitor once."

"Sure. Hannele from Hillsboro?" sighs Mimi.

"And what was wrong with Hannele?" asks Temperance, hands on her hefty hips. "He buttons himself properly. He has a spotless past. He owns three hundred acres. He is quite popular."

That must have been right after we arrived. When Hannele saw Mimi, he had been widowed fourteen years, he said that she would do, now was the time, he was a modest man and not that picky-picky. He studied everything about my mother, thoroughly, and realized her only earthly goods were just three cardboard boxes. But Hannele came courting, nonetheless. He laid a stubborn siege.

She smiled a toothless smile. "I'd rather not," said Mimi.

Still, he came several Sundays in a row, in an old, bucking Buick that had a handle missing. He was one of those fellows who, a little short of breath but long on doggedness, can't force big words across his lips but knows how to let go of little rolling yodels when an Oktoberfest arrives. His hair was neatly brushed and parted with cold water, and he wore shoes with shiny double buckles.

He told my mother all about himself. He gave her the width of his sleeves, the breadth of his shoulders. He held strong views on evolution, excessive sports, lipstick, Jehovah's Witnesses and other moral pitfalls.

"We are made for each other," he told her and patted the spot

next to him.

That was the only time I saw my mother cry.

She knew a man's love once. His name was Jonathan.

When Hitler's torch lights flickered, she was still young and beautiful. She felt the warmth of one short summer in her hair.

But then the years slipped by. Her eyes lost their luster; her step lost its bounce. Her hair turned gray, then white. Now she has rheumatism churning in her bones, and death is just around the corner. But to this day, she still remembers Jonathan.

"As I look back," she told me once, "it seems to me that only hours passed. Do you remember him? I see him vividly." Those thoughts are born of loneliness and sorrow. Most of the time, she keeps them to herself.

Yes, I remember Jonathan. His love was like a touch of wing, in service to ideals he thought could never be destroyed. Willpower. Strength. Devotion. Work. Tenacity. Pride and self-confidence. All that.

"He fought," says Mimi stubbornly, "because he thought the Soviet monster could be smitten. He loved his Fatherland, a country strong and beautiful, a land like any other land on earth that sent her sons to war—"

In Josie's spotless kitchen, she pleads with passion and conviction that Germany is surely entitled, is she not, to rest her heroes in their far-flung graves? Without insults and sneers?

But Archie slurps his coffee noisily and tries to change the subject. All that is theoretical. Where Jonathan lies buried, nobody ever knew.

*

The night is cool and moonlit. The freshly fallen snow outside is delicate as lace. Around me it is dark and still, and I am glad that I am finally alone.

I always sleep in Rarey's room, dressed for the night in one of Josie's flannel gowns. I like to be alone with Rarey. I am

more intimate with Rarey than I could ever be with people still alive. He, too, rests in eternity, where I will be tomorrow, where Josie dwells, no doubt. Her Bible tells me so. It's sitting on the night stand. In her old age, she started reading it, which pleased the relatives.

I pick it up, and it falls open to the passages she loved. Though her own Faith was off-beat to the end, she loved the poetry inherent in the Scriptures as caught in that exquisite mixture of sadness and relief. And here it says, as if I didn't know: "For man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble."

That is the message that is woven in my genes.

"He comes forth like a flower," says Josie's chancy Faith, with which I, of another generation and of another world, can easily identify, never having felt the certitude that marks the simpleton. "He flees like a shadow and does not continue."

All flesh is grass, says Josie's Faith, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, because the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever.

As for man, his days are like grass; as a flower of the field, so he flourishes. For the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its own place remembers it no more.

How much did Rarey know of Apanlee that gave him life—and death?

The room is given over to his memory. For Rarey Neufeld, Josie's last-born, much-beloved son, eternity began in a sharp burst of light the U.S. government went to some pains describing.

She should be proud, the letter said; the nation grieved with her; her young son gave his life, regrettably—but in a blaze of glory while straining for the sun.

What nobler sacrifice?

It happened in the last days of the war. The city of Berlin lay way below, defeated and collapsed, convulsing in its death throes.

Death, said the telegram, was instantaneous, while what was left of his young life sailed through the April clouds and fell into a tulip bed.

That's how young Rarey died—in someone's tulip bed.

The Air Force, Josie told me in that brittle voice of hers that cracked each time she spoke of her lost son, wrapped Rarey in a silken flag, and buried him for just a little while on a small plot that gently sloped toward a river. The air that day, the letter claimed that came after the telegram, was thick and sweet with spring.

Not so when he came home to Arlington, the stars and stripes wrapped all around his casket so that his comrades had to fumble for the handle. The heavens wept that day.

"All day long," Josie told me once while doing almost all the talking, sipping tea, explaining that the European war had been a necessary evil, fought honorably, won by the strength of righteous wrath, "it rained in a light drizzle. I guess the angels cried."

I guess they did. The angels must have cried. He was an Aryan. He fought a *Bruderkrieg*—a fratricidal war.

His medals, ribbons, watch and billfold, scores of old newspaper clippings, old postcards, the death certificate replete with Presidential seal and listing hometown, serial number, rank—all that is still preserved and dusted every week. Even his army jacket. The one he wore before he fell into the rubble of Berlin and landed in a tulip bed.

Said Josephine: "The honor guard shot thrice into the leaden sky—" And Josie flinched, each time, she told me decades later, while sipping tea and dabbing at her eyes, "—as though the bullets struck my heart, but I must tell you this. It's odd but true. I never felt so proud."

"A sad and rainy day," said Josephine, while telling me about the son she sacrificed to let what she called the Four Freedoms reign.

He must have believed it was so. He had been told this would

be his last mission; his duty was to to rid the world of Hitler's shadow, to smash the loathsome city. He could still see the flotsam of the great migrations, still struggling on through all the rubble, cluttering the Führer's Autobahn. He held his wing tips steady. He nosed his airplane up and tried to fly out of the pall of dust and smoke—straight up into the sun. The war was almost done; he was just about done with the barbarians; he could go home and raise a child. His first.

He reached for his binoculars and peered down at the cratered landscape. His thoughts were drifting; he was glad; he was not meant to be a soldier; he of a clan of pacifists; he saw his wife; he saw his baby boy; his heart was light and free. He plunged, released his bombs, pulled up into a climb and knew that his comrades stood by the Elbe, waiting for the Russian bear—and at this moment, down below, it happened.

I saw it; I was there.

As he descended carefully, he may have realized he came into some anti-aircraft fire. Maybe. And maybe not. I often think of that. He may have vaguely realized that someone, down below, was nipping at his silver wings with a well-oiled and swinging ack-ack gun—and that, on any other day he might have been more cautious!—but on this day, his thoughts were with his wife and child, for word had come. At last.

"The war was over. Finally. The Führer's dream was dead."

When Josie told me that, one sunny afternoon that baked the prairie soil, a burly youth, born six months after World War II, named after a forgotten forebear who traded, so the story goes, those first blessed kernels from the Tartars that feed the world today, materialized out of the kitchen and sat beside her silently and gently stroked her hand.

"The angels cried. The angels cried. The angels cried," young Peet consoled his grandmother, as though it were a litany. "Remember how it rained? One of those good old country rains that drench the land so that the earth renews?"

I know that kind of rain. There's nothing like it. Nothing.

I will tell you a secret. It doesn't even have a name, but it

exists. Believe me it exists. The force of nature can't be stopped. It rises from the earth. It's gathering at the horizon. It will arrive and drench America; for she is parched for rain. The leaves and the grass have stopped growing. The fields lie sapless. Barren. Thirsting. The soil—Jan's soil, Peet's soil—cannot renew until it rains again.

Now between wakefulness and sleep, I finally face up to Erika—as she was then; not as she is today. It is as though I see a double feature—first one side, then the other.

First I see Rarey, young and kind and full of life and nothing but goodwill and certitude. Then I see Lilo, likewise.

And there is Erika, still without words, still non-descript. Right in the middle. Scared.

In California, I hardly ever think of Erika, as busy as I am. But here, in Rarey's room, she comes alive as though by magic—a slim, young thirteen-year-old girl in Hitler uniform perched next to a small anti-aircraft gun, right on a Berlin rooftop, and at her side a wounded man. With SS epaulets.

Her name was Erika. His name was Jonathan. Both came from Apanlee, where duty was writ large.

He was a German soldier, a convert to the Mystic Cross—the cult of Blood and Soil and Race. It was a cult as arbitrary, all-embracing, monolithic, absolute, authoritarian as Archie ever could have wished. She was an honor student, one of those tiny timid females caught in the Führer's war, all thumbs and toes, still much too babyish—but that would change; she was resolved that it would change, consumed as she was in those last sad days of war with a raw will to live, to fight against the cowardice that was the dragon of her youth, and has been ever since.

True. Erika survived. The war was over, and she lived. All life was ashes, but she lived. Not that it mattered, but she lived. How? On numb feet across a dead city, that's how.

She survived because she had hidden herself in the ashcan the psychic had spoken about. She crouched in that ashcan, hour

after hour, while all around her, roof by roof and house by house, a city flew apart.

The stars kept raining bombs. The guns belched ceaselessly. The ashcan was dented all over.

Then it grew light. The noise died down. The hissing and sputtering stopped. The shelling fell off around dawn. The airplanes that had tried to blow all life to smithereens miraculously vanished. The sun came out—a bloody ball three times its size, monstrously magnified by all the dust and smoke.

Berlin was Ghost City, writ large.

With hands that were trembling with terror and chill, she lifted the lid and crawled out.

It hurt to walk. It hurt to sit. It hurt to breathe in air. The streets were lit with fire, the sky was crimson still, the trees stood beheaded and the neighbors were dead. She guessed it might be Tuesday—scrap day! to go from door to door collecting papers, clothes, bones, helmets—anything!—to help the Führer's war along, but one quick glance sufficed to know that that was foolish, verily! as useless as her ration vouchers dated yesterday.

What fighting there still was had now dispersed into the side streets and small alleys. She sensed a breathing spell.

She sat down at the rim of a bomb crater, half-filled with dirty water. A main line must have broken; the water still gurgled and seeped. Something was floating there, but luckily face down.

She looked around. The streets were foul with refuse. A coward had unfurled a banner from the window, and it was white, the color of surrender. That gave her a brief jolt, but she composed herself.

She carefully sidestepped the carcass of a burned-out bus and came upon a weeping toddler who reached for her and clung to her—a snot-smeared child with sunken eyes, no older than three years. He was a trying sight. His soles were charred, and that was sad. She wondered what to do. She hesitated, undecided, then bent to him and lifted him into a suitcase, spilling things. She freed herself from his small fists still clutching at her skirt as

though they were two burrs. Though he whimpered and sniveled and wouldn't let go, she patted him briefly and walked.

She rallied all her strength still left to find the street where Heidi lived. It, too, was black with death.

Her chest felt tight and prickly as she kept looking hard. Stalled trucks and burnt-out automobiles lined the street and blocked her way; she scrambled, dazed and blinded, across all obstacles, some of them smoking faintly. As she stood, contemplating her next step, a tank came barreling around the corner, and she ducked just in time. She watched it crush the tulips. That's when it came to her that this was Heidi's house that took the bomb smack on the roof. She knew it by the tulips.

She found the mail box next. Some giant fist had crushed it flat, but Heidi's name was legible. She stood silent, not even surprised.

Small fires were eating away at the rafters, creating black gaps in the rubble. There was a deep hole where the cellar had been; small wisps curled from the ashes.

She didn't weep. There was no point in weeping over Heidi who would remain in that rubble forever. She simply sat down, in the ashes.

She would never feel young again. Ever. There might be a tomorrow still, but yesterday was gone. Her former self was gone. It had died, exhausted from hurting.

She sat there for the longest time until a soft thing nudged at her, and that was Lilo's pet. He had no tail and only three legs, and his left eye was hanging by a sinew.

"Well, Winston Churchill. It's all over now," she said to Lilo's pet, amazed she still had words.

The mutt gave a whimpering sound.

A veil of dust hung in the air. The cloud of ashes was so thick the sun could not break through. The world she had known lay in smoldering ruins, but she was hungry; she would eat. She kept looking for something to eat, and she found it before it was noon:

a bone that looked like a thigh bone. The fire had gnawed off the flesh. She didn't know if it was man or beast, but she would take her chances. She took a brick and crushed it. She slurped the marrow, raw.

Now there was sweet contentment in her belly.

She decided to check up on Lilo. Somebody had to check, and so she did; she checked. The pet helped some; he whimpered and hobbled, three-legged.

Lilo lay where she had fallen, a soldier for the cause. She lay supine and very still, her young lips pale and slack. Her sooty face was gray. Her blond, fat braids were singed. Someone had violated her in death; had rammed a flag pole's sharpened end from in between her legs into her twisted body with such force that it stuck out where Lilo's lusty heart had beaten for the future. Yesterday.

Was that a shock? Well, yes and no.

Her knees were buckling, but she looked. Her eyes were blurring, but she looked. And then she did something that came by itself. Her arm shot out; she stood straight; she gave Lilo the Führer salute.

Her name was Erika. That was the timid girl I knew, so many years ago.

She is no longer part of me; I have disowned her to survive; but once upon a distant time, I knew her well indeed. She gave Lilo the Führer salute. It was the only thing still left to do, the most natural thing in the world. It wasn't that she felt the need to be dramatic; or blasphemous; or obstinate; there was no irony in that; she wasn't trying to say anything or make heroic gestures. She stood in a world bereft of all landmarks, and gave over her heart to the wind.

That's how I still see Erika—this after all these years—saluting her brave and defiant and beautiful friend who blew a lot of bubbles each morning as she brushed her teeth, who dreamed the day would come when she would shine on celluloid, who had a whole life to look forward to, who always scolded Erika:

"Where is your spirit, girl? It's for the Fatherland—" and whom the Allies killed.

The firing fell off around noon. Cheap cotton flags, with pentagrams, the logo of the Antichrist, stitched onto them by hand, appeared and fluttered down from blackened, gutted windows.

Two were still left. Alive.

A soldier and a girl were left, alone, atop a bombed-out edifice, the moon-lit night around them, while down below, Berlin lay in its death throes. He knew his wound was mortal, but there were calm and fealty in his face; he had one last devoted little comrade, next to him, a little girl in Hitler uniform, who did her duty neatly, who carried to him food and drink and what morsels of news she could gather. He had a small transmitter. He broadcast for as long as someone still took messages.

The anguish coming from his wounded leg had thickened his speech and glazed his vision; his leg was badly gangrenous.

She said to him. "In every door, a drunken Russian."

"I know."

By then, she had stopped counting. It happened day by day.

She took that risk; she carried food and drink and news, bypassing monsters wearing pentagrams on furry caps, prowling in search of loot and mayhem, who jeered and ordered her: "*Komm. Komm. Frau, komm.*" Sometimes they saw how young she was, and then they called her *Fräulein.*

They said: "*Komm, Fräulein. Komm.*"

Then they would grab her by her hair and treat her cruelly, and even when she tried to hide herself beneath some blankets, say, or maybe in the straw, depending on the situation, they jabbed at her with pointed bayonets and grabbed her by the ankles and pulled hard. And she would go with them and once again endure.

At night, she would sit, shivering, within the bend of Jonathan's good arm that lay in a warm scoop around her narrow shoulders. He was a man. She was a girl. Love comes in many

shades.

The moon was throwing shadows when he said: "I want you to remember that there are absolutes worth knowing. They have nothing to do with the outcome. The outcome can be bought. Or forced. Or swindled. Or connived. But absolutes cannot."

He said to her while giving her his legacy atop a dying city:

"Some win, and others lose. Some die, and others live. The losers are forgotten in defeat; the winners write their history. The winners do their cartwheels; the losers have no voice. And in the end, who counts the medals? Anyone? Will anybody ever read the balance sheet correctly? But always you remember: there is a history worth knowing. The earth has rights. It belongs to the bravest and best."

She took his hand and stroked it. Her fingers felt their way along a scar.

"A dog bit you?"

"No, not a dog. A little girl. A little cousin I once loved. It happened long ago."

She did not ask: "Why are you telling me? As if I didn't know."

She quietly listened as he said: "If you survive, you'll have a mission, Erika. You are a child of gifted fancy. Here's what you must remember, always. There is a story to be told. Don't touch up anything."

She had just finished changing Jonathan's blood-soaked, earth-crusted bandages, when she looked up and saw two men in speckled uniform. One of these men was huge and black. Colossal. Towering. Her hands flew to her lips and she shrank back against the wall, for she had never seen a Negro, ever, not even in a photograph. The other one was gangly, vague, with sanctimonious brows; he looked excitable and edgy in a simmering, smoldering way.

"Gum?" asked the Negro, grinning, chewing, inspecting her with a black glitter in his eyes.

Gum. *Komm.*

She had endured an avalanche of rape. The words were practically identical. He had fat thumbs, fat cheeks; he rolled his l's and r's; his neck was purple and bombastic and he was shifting chewing gum from cheek to cheek while looking for an opportunity to pounce. His hands had vanished, fumbling, in his trousers, but both his thumbs stuck out, and they were wiggling now. He was the worst of feral beasts out of her many nightmares, but his companion, freckled, weasly, looked vaguely familiar.

"Well, well. This will be a day to remember," said the black paratrooper and nodded in a significant way, while the second, the blond one, leaned forward and said, slightly slurred:

"Well, I'll be damned! Look what we found. A real live Nazi girl."

The C.O. volunteers of Mennotown did not wear guns, and Archie didn't either, but that night, to be safe, Archie had borrowed one as he and his black pal stepped out into the dark to calm their jagged nerves.

It had been a harrowing day.

He had arrived in Germany with all the best intentions, and he was sickened in his soul. One of the first relief cohorts sent overseas to comb through the rubble and pick up survivors, Archie was trying hard; intent on building goodwill with the burlap sacks of Mennotown, setting a splint to a world out of joint. That day, he had worked sixteen hours at a stretch; his head was throbbing with revulsion and fatigue. He, Archie Epp, may not have finished high school, but was he anybody's fool?

He understood one thing: of remorse, there was none. These people, whom he tried to help, were still disciples of the Führer.

He had enlisted, taken pity, packed his bags, forsaking his soft bed in Kansas. And he expected gratitude. Remorse. Contrition. Penitence. And there was none of that.

But prayers must come first, insisted Archibald, reared in the Faith and, hence, affirming Faith and, yes! obedience. Obedience writ large! He was proud of his pacifist mission. He cut the straps to let the losers get an eyeful of the riches of a land that

stressed equality and, hence, reaped peace and harmony: dresses and shirts, shoes and socks and sweaters—all items to alleviate the suffering of war. Little Melly's Christian spirit was alive in every patch and stitch; he smelled that in the smell of mothballs; he felt it in his fingertips.

He tried to talk to them. He tried to listen to their stories, but what they told him made no sense at all.

"You're mercenaries for the Beast," said one, and others nodded gravely. They told him even then: "You'll find out soon enough."

They said: "We're innocent. It's you, Americans, who bear the guilt for what will happen next. We tried to finish off the Antichrist. We tried to stem the tide."

They didn't look so innocent to him. "You're criminals," he told them, sparing no one, then or now. "You're scum. The worst. You're hooligans."

They looked at him with glassy, apathetic eyes. It was too much. It was plain overload. His spectacles fogged up. He was sick to death of them all—all famished, sick and weary, with vermin in their hair and hunger in their eyes, still loyal to their Führer. The devil's brood they were, as far as he could tell—this untidy flotsam of war, no doubt flag-waving all the way to prison or, better yet, goose-stepping to Siberia.

Which was just fine with him!

He was building a murderous rage. He needed to cool off. That's when he motioned to his Negro friend who pocketed one gun and handed a second to Archie.

Together, they stepped out into the streets to draw a breath of air, and that is when he spotted it—the shredded parachute still hanging from a tree. And that's when every shred of pacifism went like poof! and Archie knew that, given provocation, he, too, would kill.

He'd kill the Hun! He'd finish off the Hun! Without remorse! With gusto!

This was Archie's murderous moment.

Ever since that rock, hurled hard against his people's ethnic pride, had ripped out his right eye and forced him to his knees, he had kept rage inside. And that's precisely when he heard a strange, suspicious sound, pushed open a burned door, stepped gingerly into the hall, and found those two: the trembling Hitler girl beside the wounded *Landser*. And something snapped in Archie.

His lungs filled up with wrath. He knew that this was it. All guns had fallen silent; peace had already been declared, and there they were, the viper's brood, manning their anti-aircraft gun still pointed at the sky.

A wave of fury flooded Archie's chest with an enormous whoosh! He touched the barrel; it was hot; he could have sworn it was still hot. He could not pry the girl's hands from the barrel.

"Don't move, or I will shoot," he bellowed, which was superfluous because he knew he would—this was his opportunity. It would not slip away. His unit leader had a German wife from Pennsylvania, one of those old and stubborn crusts who stuck to ethnic pride, through thick and thin, against all better evidence. If his commander knew this Nazi riffraff, hiding here, evading justice, were counting on American largesse, he'd botch the opportunity.

"Are you Ameri—" the German soldier said but did not finish what he meant to say, for Archie had his finger on the trigger. It curled around the bolt.

"You bet I am," said Archie. "You bet your blasted swastika I am." He said to her: "You little viper! You! Now move! You heard me! I said move!" while his black buddy lumbered forward clumsily. "Gum? *Fräulein*? Gum?" he asked, for lack of better words.

She saw the huge, black hands still fumbling in the pockets of his trousers. The *Landser* saw it, too; he swung around and felt with his good hand for his own gun, and that's when Archie pulled the trigger. It gave him a sweet rush. The barrel went poof! and the *Landser* fell back and was dead.

The little girl in Hitler uniform was hiccuping.

But Archie wasn't finished yet. He gave her an enormous

shove and said in halting German, thick with the diphthongs of four centuries:

"Now, listen, you! You little runt! This war is over, and you lost! You lost! You lost! You lost!"

*

Rarey's last letter:

"— if we can get this business of Fascism knocked off and get the world into some semblance of order and keep it there for a time, our son and his contemporaries will take over and make something really good of it. We're learning, but a great many mistakes will be made before a really good world order will evolve. If we can clear the air for our child and his generation, we're fat!

"This war seems incidental because it's already begun to exhaust itself. The vital thing is to get and keep the thing straightened out long enough for all the little ones to come to bat—not with two strikes on them but with a clear field. They'll have the intelligence to keep things in order. We'll teach them.

"The setting is perfect for the thing I love best, dream of the two people who are my life—the lovely warm delightful Betty Lou, and our son right at the very brink of this beautiful life. By the time I get home I figure he will be rugged enough to toss around a little—how I dream of that! I hope our child has a chance to contribute his two cents' worth of light and color to this battered old world without being swept up on one of these mechanized free-for-alls.

"My normal place is beside you, and my lifelong job is being your husband and our son's old man. That fine head of yours! That wonderful Betty Lou that I love to the very raw ends of my nerves! You know the picture of you and our child—you in that fine bemused profile and my baby yawning his old head off? Well, it is now mounted in a frame of plexiglass upon my instru-

ment panel—right beween the gyre horizon and the altimeter.

"God, how I'd like to be with you this evening. To talk to you and to touch your sweet young face—to watch your eyes when they sparkle—to hear you laugh.

"These are the things I think of as I go to sleep and I think of them as I wake. They are part of the fabric of my mind. Woven in with all of my vague, uncertain ideas about things in general is this pattern that you have made by your mental, physical and spiritual warmth.

"You know, Betty Lou, in a few days we will have been married two years. We pooled our lives in that beautiful little town called Mennotown, surrounded with fine friends, up to our eyebrows in love. I don't know the date—it was sort of gradual like the unfolding of a beautiful flower that blooms only once, and once open, grows more beautiful with each succeeding day. And now that little rosebud of a baby is growing on the same bush. That place wasn't big enough to hold my happiness—even with the big window open. I've loved you there and in a thousand other places made wonderful by you.

"I am impatient with this tremendous war, anxious to be finished with it so that we can do the things we were meant to do—so that we can live. I want to live with you, Betty Lou—I want to give you everything I can—I want to live with you and love you for the next forty-three thousand years. I want to sit across a table from you in one of our favorite places and eat and talk and just watch you. I want to touch your hair and kiss you on your lovely mouth. I want long evenings with you filled with things we like together, long nights, your love and warmth.

"I dream of these things. I want to wake up and see you there, and I want to have breakfast with you and begin a full, wonderful day together, the days following one after another with no interruption, just the two happy people with their beautiful child and their love.

"The fine, fine years we had together fill my mind with won-

derful happy pictures of things past. We will have such years again—better years—we have a child now and he makes us just one third richer than we were. I can wait, Betty Lou, as long as is necessary—but God, I'd like to see you. Stay with it, Betty Lou; this war isn't exactly going backwards.

"Things are happening.

"I think of that house and how we'll fix it up and how we'll live in it together. I get so happy my feet hurt. I want to see the funny hats you buy and I want to loaf around the house cluttering up things generally. This is a good war and we must see it through, but, dammit, Betty Lou, I want the life that we have planned—we can make it a beauty, darling. The living we've done together has been some of the finest I can imagine, and it will get better and better. We'll improve with age and grow mellow as a cello with the passing years. Our son and his friends will flock to our house. They'll love his mother and put up with his old man because he'll make sling shots and kites for them and tell them tall stories about the great war. I come from a long, uninterrupted line of family men, Betty Lou, and I plan to carry on in the old Mennotown tradition, even if I have been interrupted a bit by this small but vigorous global fracas.

"Keep that sparkle in your eyes and that tilt to your chin. Tomorrow the old man hits the 27th mark—I still feel like I should be about fourteen but there it is. How I should like to see you. I'd like to borrow just ten minutes from the great treasure of time that we will spend together when this war is over—just ten minutes—I wish I could send you a whole bushel of emeralds.

"I love you two people with my very life and soul. My old heart is yours completely. Give my very best regards to the tribe—and remember, Betty Lou, I'm yours, all yours, and have just been loaned to the Army for the duration—"

Rarey died -
Jonathan died -
Millions of innocents died!

They died - while others lied!

I dedicate this saga
to the maligned heroes
and the forgotten victims of
several fratricidal wars in our century - men and
women, brave beyond belief, who hurled themselves
against the forces of the New World Order